

**“Blessed are those who know their need of God,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”**

June 13th 2010

Gal 2.15-end & Luke 7.36-8.3

I'm not sure if I'm going to enjoy the World Cup; last night's match between England and USA had too much agony and too little ecstasy. Football at its best is a beautiful game and it's good to be able to subsume my competitive instincts into support for the local or national team. When I was growing up I discovered myself to be both very competitive and pretty hopeless at sport; the result was unhappiness and broken rackets.

It's also exam time for many young people, including our twins. They work hard at maintaining a balance between delighting in each others' successes, and being quite competitive with one another. It's difficult sometimes as parents congratulating one and commiserating with the other. Like all good schools theirs encourages ASPIRATION – wanting to be the best you can possibly be – and I think that is different from competitiveness – beating other people.

In today's gospel Luke, typically, contrasts with just a few brush strokes two very different characters. Simon is male, wealthy, powerful. His religion sets him apart; it is based on obedience to the holiness code which you will find set out in Leviticus. That defined what was unclean and what wasn't. It drew boundaries and both excluded and included. It's what St Paul in today's first reading means by “works of the law”. Simon the Pharisee believed himself made righteous by obeying certain rules about living, eating, who you associated with: a moral code.

The dinner party he held would have been more public than those we are used to. Other people would have been hanging about on the edges, and one such is this woman. She by contrast with him is female, literally on the margins, she has no power or status, and he calls her a sinner. But it is she who receives Jesus' blessing and forgiveness.

What is it about her that draws this response from him? It is that she knows her need of God. While Simon is self-sufficient, closed, with powerful friends, secure, she has nothing except her awareness of her need of God, and the certain knowledge that this need had been fulfilled in this man whose feet she washed with her tears and her ointment. And so Jesus' forgiveness of her frees her to begin to become all that God desires of her. His love draws that aspiration from her. Because she knows that this meeting has quite literally changed her life and brought her salvation, she cannot help but pour forth her gratitude in this dramatic way as Jesus lay at the table, feet facing outwards as was the custom.

Jesus sees in her all that she can become. He loves her as she is but far too much to leave her like that – which is how he loves us too. By contrast he sees in Simon someone whose religious practice has closed his heart and created sufficiency not need.

These are difficult days for all churches in the western world. But they do have the potential as Bishop Stephen Cottrell has said, to create a much humbler Church. We here have no status – what draws us here is just our awareness of our need of God and the knowledge that in the Jesus we meet here in word, in bread and wine and in one another, that need begins to be satisfied. Because here we are forgiven, we are set free to become all that God desires for us. Here we catch a glimpse of the vision God has for us. His love in Jesus draws that aspiration from us, so that we want to be the best we can possibly be for God - earnestly desiring the greater gifts as St Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians chapter 12. That's what being loved without limit does to you – setting free the chrysalis to become a butterfly.

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We have had a very generous response to our campaign so far, and we hope those of you not present at the presentation evening in May will sign up. We need that campaign to be well organised which is why we have employed a professional organisation to do that for us. But in the end the only basis for a successful campaign is this deep gratitude in the hearts of each one of us that in Jesus our need for God has been filled up. That in him we are forgiven, set free from our self-centredness to aspire to be the best we can be for God. That knowledge and that gratitude must express itself in generosity – generous living and generous giving. Because we catch a glimpse here of all we could be and are given the love and grace to reach out towards that. Aspirational living.

“Blessed are those who know their need of God, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”
(Matthew 5).

I’m going to finish with George Herbert’s famous poem – Love

“Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back, guilty of dust and sinne.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack, from my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning, if I lacked anything.

A guest, I answer’d, worthy to be here: Love said, you shall be he.
I the unkinde, ungrateful? Ah my dear, I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply, Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marr’d them: let my shame go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, sayes Love, who bore the blame? My deare, then I will serve.
You must sit down, sayes Love, and taste my meat: So I did sit and eat.”

Mark Thomas.