**18th January 2015**

**Luke 7.36-50**

The march of three million people in France last weekend was a powerful gesture by the people of that nation to uphold the freedom of speech and liberty. The massacre of journalists at the Charlie Hebdo offices by Islamic jihadists, in retaliation at their cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammed, has resulted in many defiant gestures in the cause of freedom of speech. Just a few days ago the next edition of Charlie Ebdo once again had a cartoon of the prophet Mohammed on its front cover with the caption ‘All is forgiven’. A satirical comment perhaps on the unforgiving nature of the Islamic jihadists and their inability to take a joke.

Much comment has been made about the presence of certain heads of state who took part in the march in Paris. The Saudi government was represented at a time when there is controversy about a Saudi blogger Raif Badawai, who is an atheist and who has made critical comments about Islam and Saudi government, being sentenced to 1000 lashes, fifty a week for foreseeable Fridays. Maybe their presence was ironic in itself. Egypt’s president was there despite the Egyptian military government imprisoning Al Jazeera journalists because they didn’t like their criticisms. Some therefore called the Paris protest the ‘March of hypocrisy’.

The phrase ‘I don’t like what you say but I will defend your right to say it’ has been the principle those who marched would probably say they were supporting. Many held up slogans ‘Je suis Charlie’ showing their identification with all that the satirical comic Charlie Ebdo stands for.

I don’t know if you would have happily held up a Je suis Charlie sign? I’m in two minds. Yes I would want to defend freedom of speech. All truth is God’s truth we shouldn’t be afraid of questioning and having rigorous debate and discussion, thinking the unthinkable, saying the unsayable.

However as Christian I would want to do everything in love. I wouldn’t want to go out of my way to deliberately offend, or provoke for the sake of provoking.

Satire always seems to leave a bitter taste. It mocks and ridicules in an attempt to shame individuals, corporations, government or society itself, into improvement. It has therefore a self-righteous edge – the satirists are saying I know what is right and I am mocking those who have got it wrong. It can often be smug and cynical, sceptical and sarcastic – all of which are negative and acidic forms of speech and expression. They say sarcasm is the lowest form of wit – perhaps because it belittles or hurts someone, it laughs at their expense.

Once someone is known for their sarcasm, their irony, their cynicism, their satirical edge, you never know whether they are being genuine and honest with their comments and praise, should they ever feel moved to offer any. Usually they are devoid of saying anything positive and thankful. So that is why I’d be reluctant to hold up a Je Suis Charlie poster. I don’t want to be like Charlie Ebdo!

There is a place without doubt for using [wit](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wit) as a weapon and as a tool to draw attention to both particular and wider issues in society. Jesus employs it here in this wonderful story of the sinful woman who anoints his feet.

Jesus is in the home of a Pharisee. Pharisees were obsessed with living righteous lives. What lifestyle would make them right with God? How could they live to please God? It is an honourable aspiration yet often led them into legalism and self-righteousness. There were different positions in the Pharisaic movement. The majority were what we would call hard line right wingers, but several, including perhaps Simon, the Pharisee mentioned in this story, may have been prepared to give Jesus a fair hearing. He has heard rumours that Jesus is a prophet and he is keen to see for himself.

A woman interrupts their dinner with an outrageous display of affection towards Jesus. She is an uninvited guest, but this was first century Palestine and the doors to houses would always remain open, allowing anyone to walk in.

Luke comments that the woman had led a sinful life in that town. He doesn’t spell out the nature of her sinfulness – the reader can only speculate. Many have tied this passage with what comes next in chapter 8 where among Jesus followers are named three women who support Jesus and his itinerant disciples, one of the women being named as Mary Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out. Some have speculated that this woman who anoints Jesus was Mary Magdalene, and that her sinful life was in prostitution – but there is no historical or literary reason, despite Dan Brown and the Da Vinci Code – to connect the nameless woman whose sins are forgiven with Mary Magdalene. It is just pure speculation.

We have got a discussion on same sex marriage this Thursday evening. There is lot of speculation and connections made which are often unfair. Some people think that those who oppose same sex marriage are homophobic – which is hugely unfair and disrespectful to what they may believe is being true to a biblical position. Those who support same sex marriage are often regarded as liberal Christians who are disregarding the bible and just going with the spirit of the age because it’s easier than standing up for biblical truth. Again I would say that was hugely unfair and disrespectful for those who have a different reading of the bible but are still passionately committed to its truth.

Within a day of reminding members on email about the discussion I had one person who said what is there to discuss – it is obviously wrong. Then later I had another person offended that we have to discuss people’s lives when it is obviously the case that some people are homosexual and we should support them in finding a stable and loving relationship. I pray the discussion on Thursday will be free, respectful and open as we seek God’s guidance and leading on this matter.

There is a suggestion of something sexual about this story of the woman anointing Jesus and Simon the Pharisee reads it as such. Her behaviour is not the sort of polite respectable behaviour you would expect at a dinner party. In any culture, a woman bursting in and flinging themselves at the feet of one of your guest and wetting them with her tears and then pouring expensive anointment over them would be shocking and striking and get the guests talking. Tongues would wag. Jesus is accused elsewhere in the gospel for being a drunkard and glutton and hanging out with tax collectors and prostitutes, To make matters worst this woman lets her hair down, something no decent woman would do in public in the culture of that day. This can be read as an erotically charged gesture.

No wonder therefore that Simon the Pharisee thinks to himself ‘if this man were a prophet he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is – that she is a sinner!’

Jesus, the wit, leads him on. He leans over to him and says ‘Simon I have something to tell you.’ You could read it as though Jesus has a guilty secret and he is now ready to come clean to the righteous Pharisee. Simon leans in to him and says ‘tell me what it is teacher!’ expecting the full lurid details ready to expose Jesus to the Palestinian tabloids.

Instead Jesus uses satire. He tells a parable with the intention to shame Simon the Pharisee and to change his attitude and behaviour. He talks about two people owing a debt: one much larger than the other. The person they owe the debt too cancels them both. Which one is more grateful? Simon answers obviously the one who has had the bigger debt cancelled.

Jesus then uses the story to show the contrast. The woman is so stigmatized by her sins as to be a public figure and Simon comes across as a blind smug religionist who cannot perceive the genuine gratitude of a forgiven woman.

At some point this woman has heard a word of divine pardon, and her deep sense of personal gratitude has prompted this extravagant response, in spite of the hostile and critical environment and how other people will interpret her actions. Jesus statement to her in verse 48 ‘your sins are forgiven, your faith has saved you, go in peace’… confirms what has been going on. She has returned to Jesus to give thanks for her newfound life.

Islamic jihadists would probably have been too puritanical and moralistic to grant her forgiveness. The satirists of Charlie Hebdo may have been too cynical and sarcastic to accept the authenticity of her gratitude and how genuine she and Jesus were being.

This story serves to expose our modern moralisms and dramatize for us an authentic response to divine grace.

Last week we talked about grace and forgiveness. This month we have been considering the theme of following Jesus and what that involves. At this time of year when people are thinking about getting in shape again and pursuing health and well-being, I have been suggesting that following Jesus is a most comprehensive way to health and well-being.

Two weeks ago I said following Jesus was not just personal but also political – it involved a concern for your neighbour’s well-being not just your own. That is hinted at in this story. It is intriguing in the parable Jesus tells to find forgiveness of sins depicted by forgiveness of debts, an experience no doubt well known to Galilean peasants. Their whole lives as well as their futures were bound up with their financial obligations. Paying taxes to Caesar, paying their landlord, paying the temple tax. Women who were divorced or widowed, with no family to support them, would often have to resort to prostitution to pay their debts. Economic pressures influenced their behaviour and morality – as it can do today. Pardon of debts, then has nothing to do with guilt but rather with the restoration of life, a chance to start again, the renewal of hope. One of the urgent challenges for Britain is to cope with our debts and find renewal of hope.

Forgiveness is always controversial. What about paying your debt for the wrong you have committed. What about justice and punishment. The coming of the kingdom of God in popular opinion at the time of Jesus had an expectation of vengeance and punishment on those who had done wrong and the enemies of the god-fearing society. Jesus in his preaching and ministry was standing that expectation on its head. The coming of the kingdom would be a time of exuberant generosity, surprising grace, when the last are first and the first last, when the religious righteous ones realise a new depth of righteousness, faith that came from the heart rather than an outward external show.

In this single incident, the story of the sinful woman who anoints Jesus, we see what this looks like in practice. Social convention is thrown out of the window; forgiveness and love set new standards and raise new expectations; human beings appear, not as society has ‘constructed them’ but as God sees them. Jesus in his satire and wit has turned the table on the Pharisee. He is the one guilty of poor hospitality almost as much as the social blunder of the woman letting down her hair. The Pharisee has never come to terms with the depths of his own heart, and so doesn’t appreciate God’s generous love when it sits in person at his table.

For Luke true faith happens when it looks at Jesus and discovers God’s forgiveness. The sign and proof of this faith is love and gratitude and generosity. Following Jesus, getting to grips with his grace and forgiveness, should be such a transforming experience that you really don’t care what other people think about your expressions of faith and gratitude. You don’t go counting the pennies and calculating your generosity – you give with a thankful heart, you live life with hands open, hair down and tears always ready to well up in happiness at what you know and have experienced. Your sins have been forgiven, you are loved, you are accepted by God, your life is safe and secure whatever happens. Your faith has saved you – your ability to see that, to know that, to experience that – now you can live in peace.

Faith, forgiveness, gratitude, love and peace are all in this story –all come from following Jesus and being touched by his grace and mercy. Are you at peace? Do you know you are loved accepted and forgiven. Can you forgive yourself? Is your heart grateful or is there still resentment or anger or fear residing there? Are you at peace – or are there blocks to peace in your life. Can you know the renewal of hope and the renewal of love that this woman came to know?

Unlike the satirical cartoons of Charlie Hebdo, which are designed to offend and shame, may this cartoon, this story strip from Luke’s gospel, challenge and heal, speak of love and inspire love.