

Forgiveness

A couple of weeks ago I asked a psychotherapist “what is the main underlying issue that you are presented with?” and immediately, out came a single word, shame.

Shame is often an underlying factor in personal tragedies. Victims of public shame often become objects of ridicule and shunning. They are dismissed, pushed to the margins.

We unfortunately are moving into a much more shaming culture. Our newspapers and media seem to feed on it. Those who struggle with shame withdraw into themselves, or lash out in anger, rage. To have done something shameful and to know one has come with it a sense of being unworthy, losing one’s sense of dignity. It becomes a burden that cannot easily be dislodged.

In today’s Gospel we hear how Jesus offers forgiveness and acceptance that lifts the burden of shame, allowing the young woman to forgive herself and offering her a new start, that freedom to live a true life again, of love and gratitude.

One can imagine the occasion. Jesus has arrived for a meal at the home of Simon, the Pharisee. It promises to be an evening of high hospitality, but we cannot but anticipate a sense of tension, a tension that usually follows the person of Jesus wherever he goes. The air is thick with whispers from the crowd who have followed Him as they peer through the entrance way, straining for a glimpse of the special, if not notorious guest.

Amongst the mildly chaotic scene slips in a woman at risk to herself, who creeps forward to touch Jesus. And then something extraordinary happens. She begins to cry, bending low and tending the dusty feet of Jesus with her tears. She kisses them and then gently anoints them with costly oil. The woman does not use a cloth, or the hem of her skirt, but in an intimate gesture of deep love, unfolds her hair and dries the teacher’s feet.

The atmosphere must have been electric. Like Jesus, she finds her reputation has preceded her. Whatever her wrongdoing, it carries with it public shame, a shame that has pushed her to the fringes of society and leaves her looking up at the world from a lowly place. Only when she touches Jesus does she become visible again. First, to Simon the Pharisee, whose motives of inviting Jesus are mixed. We all enjoy having a celebrity in our midst, even though we might be secretly scornful of them. If Jesus really was a prophet, He would know about this woman. And Jesus, with his usual flare for seizing the teachable moment, offers a parable on forgiveness.

Strangely, this woman has offered the hospitality and love which should have been offered by Simon himself. But let’s think about shame again. Both the public shame, as experienced by the

woman in this story and the personal, chronic shame, that can have a devastating affect on their victims.

Our culture is plagued by social tragedies, often hidden from the public view because of the shame associated with them, like an internal gauge that alerts us when we have crossed a personal or social line of appropriateness. Sometimes we are shamed by making poor choices and failing others, especially the ones we love. At another level, victims of playground bullies can suffer so much harm that these shameful moments become etched into the mind to be re-lived for decades. Adult bullies can intimidate and ostracize in ways no less cruel than children. The one being shamed can often be overwhelmed by a sense of self-condemnation and unworthiness.

The last thing the woman in this story wishes to do is to find herself at the centre of attention. She has spent most of her time hiding. So whatever draws her to Jesus must be stronger than what threatens to expose her. Even Simon snide mutterings cannot deter her. Imagine the courage it takes to walk into the centre of ridicule and to express her love and gratitude for Jesus.

Before Jesus has even said a word to her, the tears tell us that something extraordinary has already happened. She already knows the power of His love and acceptance, simply by being in His presence. It is an overwhelming moment of gratitude and freedom. And this experience of this unknown woman lies at the heart of so much religious experience that God is forgiveness. That we are forgiven even before we know our need for forgiveness. Jesus says "Your sins are forgiven. Go in peace". He is offering more than forgiveness that simply wipes the slate clean. Jesus's forgiveness lifts the burden of shame, to give her value and worth, despite how unworthy she feels.

This kind of forgiveness allows us to release the moments in time when we feel like failures to ourselves, our families or God. Despite the shame of the act, we are still of immense worth to God. And this is the freedom that forgiveness brings. A heart that is bound by sin and shame withers and dies, but the love of a forgiving God can lift us into the realms of tears, joy and gratitude.

Amen.