

THE JESUS EXPERIENCE

Luke 7:36–50

If you were here last week you may see some significance in my title this week, the Jesus Experience. Last week I was sharing my difficulties with abbreviations and I rather underlined the point by wrongly identifying the letters XP, used in a certain brand of Microsoft software. It doesn't stand for 'expert' but for 'experience'. So, you'll see, that when it comes to Windows software I'm no expert. However, I've not lost too much sleep over it. I've just put it down to experience.

All this doesn't affect the main point I was trying to make, that in life we can rely on Jesus as *the* expert. But this week I want to take things further and think about what I'm calling the Jesus Experience.

In the story we've read in Luke chapter 7 we can identify two individual people and a group of other people who all had a different experience of Jesus.

1. Simon the Pharisee

His invitation to Jesus

'One of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him'. His name was Simon. We're not told what motivated him. On the face of it, it's a magnanimous gesture. He threw a big dinner party and Luke has just reminded us that Jesus loved such an occasion. Verses 33 and 34 remind us how people perceived Jesus. 'John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, "He has a demon." The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, "Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners."'

In other words, John was regarded as a bit of a spoil sport, whereas Jesus was caricatured as a party animal. It all goes to show that if people have it in for you they'll find any excuse to bring you down. That was what happened to Jesus.

At all events, he was invited to the dinner and he went.

Simon's reservations about Jesus

Pharisees have been mentioned four times before in Luke's Gospel. The first mention was the occasion we looked at last week when a paralysed man was brought to Jesus for healing and Jesus shocked them by telling the man that his sins were forgiven.

The second mention is in chapter 6 when the Pharisees criticised the disciples for working on the Sabbath. They had been picking ears of grain and making a snack for themselves.

The third mention comes straight after that. Jesus healed a man with a shrivelled hand, and it was the Sabbath.

The fourth mention comes in chapter 7 when we're told that when John the Baptist called people to be baptised the Pharisees had not responded.

It is very clear that the Pharisees were wary of Jesus and what emerges as the story is told is that Simon shared those reservations. As Jesus was to point out, Simon did not exactly roll out the red carpet. He gave him a rather chilly reception. In fact, he didn't even show him the common courtesies that a host would normally show his guests.

His reservations about Jesus were confirmed when a woman appeared and made a very embarrassing display in front of the guests. She was a known sinner, definitely not on the guest list, and how she got into the house is a mystery.

But get in she did, and not only that, she went up behind Jesus as he reclined at the table. She was in floods of tears and she washed Jesus' feet with her tears, wiped them with her hair and poured perfume over them.

Verse 39: 'When the Pharisee who had invited [Jesus] saw this, he said 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."

His conversation with Jesus

Simon did not address these words to Jesus. He said them to himself, but Jesus knew his thoughts and replied as if the words had been spoken out loud. Verse 40: 'Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you." Tell me, teacher," he said.'

This exchange illustrates the mixed feelings Simon had about Jesus. He thought of him as a prophet. When he spoke to him he did so with great respect, calling him 'Teacher'. But behind the formal politeness there was real uneasiness. How could he be a prophet if he allowed himself to be approached this way by a sinful woman.

Jesus' answer to his unspoken question was in the form of an illustration. Verses 40 and 41: 'Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he cancelled the debts of both.'

A denarius was a day's wages in those days. I suppose we might say it was the difference between a thousand pounds and ten thousand pounds.

'He cancelled the debts of both,' Jesus said, 'Now which of them will love him more?' I suspect Simon knew he was on the spot. His reply was very tentative. 'I suppose the one who had the bigger debt cancelled.' Jesus said, 'You have judged correctly.' That's the right answer.

Verses 44 to 47: 'Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.'"

Simon had much to give: a large house, lavish hospitality, convivial company, intelligent conversation – but what he lacked in any large measure was love. And the reason for that was that he had received little in the way of forgiveness.

But did he need to be forgiven? Wasn't he one of the people who were universally recognised as better than other people? What did he need in the way of forgiveness? Jesus very cleverly made the point that his lack of love, the coldness of his welcome, his tentative response, not only showed how little he had been forgiven but also how much he needed to be forgiven.

He was confident of his own righteousness. He was critical of Jesus. He was cold and calculating and as a result his experience of Jesus brought him under the spotlight and he was found lacking.

2. The other guests

Let's think just for a moment about the other guests at the meal and their experience of Jesus. No doubt they would be in general sympathy with Simon. When they were invited to the dinner they would have had no idea how what an event it was going to be.

Think about what they saw. A sinful woman infiltrating the house, and such a performance. What a scandal.

Think about what they heard. The conversation between Jesus and Simon must have been audible to those around. You couldn't miss the point.

And what conclusion did they draw? Verse 49: 'The other guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?"' This is rather a fascinating fact. You could have imagined that the main subject of conversation would have been the behaviour of the woman whom everyone knew as a sinner and who had made such a spectacular scene. But in fact the thing that they were talking about, or rather the person, was Jesus. All eyes were on him. The main topic of conversation was this man who boldly and openly forgave sin.

For those people their encounter with Jesus was the most memorable part of the occasion.

3. The sinful woman

Something that's rather remarkable is that throughout this story we never hear the woman speak. The first thing to be noted about her is

Her history of sin

The NIV introduces her in verse 37 as 'a woman who had lived a sinful life'. That's an interpretation and a valid one. What the text actually says is that she was a 'sinner'. That was her past, her history. That's how she was known in the community. We are not told what her sins had been but they were well enough known for her to be branded for evermore a notorious sinner. A good reputation is easily lost and a bad reputation is hard to shake off.

Her experience of Christ

It was an experience of forgiveness. Everything that Jesus said to her in this story confirms that she had already been forgiven. There had been a previous encounter with Jesus when he had forgiven her sins. When Jesus says in verse 47, 'Her many sins have been forgiven,' the original text makes it clear that he is talking about something in the past. When he says to her in verse 48, 'Your sins are forgiven,' it means, 'Your sins have been forgiven, and still are forgiven.'

Her forgiveness came about through an expression of faith. In verse 50 Jesus says, 'Your faith has saved you.' That's all it takes for the slate to be wiped clean, for every sin to be forgiven and forgotten, never to be brought up against you again.

That experience of forgiveness led to an outpouring of love. She was like the debtor who had been forgiven much and who therefore loved much. She could not contain herself. Her love just poured out, in tears, in service, in sacrifice. She didn't care what anyone else thought. She just had to thank Jesus and show her love.

Finally, that faith that led to forgiveness and love was rewarded with peace. The final words Jesus spoke to her were, 'Go in peace.' It could actually be translated, 'Go into peace.' It wasn't just a momentary peace but the promise of a peace that would last.

That was her experience of Jesus. How different from Simon's. Today you may be an interested observer, or you may be a somewhat aloof critic, or you may be only too aware that you're a sinner. Your experience of Jesus will reflect more on you than on him. Jesus is the same. Your experience of him depends what's in you. The same sun which melts wax hardens clay.

Today you can know forgiveness. Your heart can be filled with love. Your faith can be strengthened and you can know his peace.