

BY THE GRACE OF GOD

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THERE IS something both wondrous and puzzling about St Luke's story of the sinful woman in the house of Simon the Pharisee.¹ Like the accounts of the samaritan woman and Zaccheus,² this lucan text provides a heartening vision of the gracious mercy of Christ healing the torpid depths of a broken life and revitalizing it with strength and peace for a fresh beginning. Indeed, the story presents a perfect answer to everyone who utters the wistful prayer found in the *Vision of Piers Plowman* (Passus V):

So I hope to have from him who is Almighty
A glimpse of his grace, and begin a season
When all times of my time will turn to profit.

Reading Luke's narrative, however, one is struck by an enigmatic silence in the text which prompts the troubling question, 'But what happened afterwards?' Most lives are so jagged with starts and stops that a reader cannot help but ask whether later this woman too may have experienced the 'falling sickness' so graphically described in the *Ancrene Riwele*. The gospel gives no answer; it does not speak of an aftermath. The woman comes out of darkness and is swallowed up by darkness. Her story is like a streak of lightning which darts out of a black sky, illumines brilliantly, but passes swiftly. And so, because it leaves no trail of light, the tale may not always produce compelling convictions about the value of her encounter with the Saviour or the permanence of its effects.

Light from the context of early catechesis

The fact that this text etches a self-contained episode creates no problem for New Testament scholarship. An expert in Form-criticism readily recognizes that St Luke has simply incorporated here an isolated memory handed down in the oral tradition of the early christian communities. More important still, the scholar is aware that the solitary unit was preserved in the local churches

¹ Lk 7, 36-50.

² Jn 4, 1-42; Lk 19, 1-10.

precisely because preachers and teachers found in it the example they needed to explain a cardinal point in the perennial catechesis. Thus several exegetes share the opinion that this story was used widely in instructing converts for baptism, to show them how the rite of christian initiation empowered and sealed their radical transformation.

This living oral context was well known to St Luke when he borrowed this item from catechetical tradition to gain material for his written record of the public ministry. The phrases with which he concludes his account (vv 48-50) bear tell-tale signs of pointed adaptation to the language of catechesis. The words, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace', reflect a catechist's previous insight into the significance of Jesus's encounter with the sinful woman as an anticipation and paradigm of the christian's experience at baptism. St Luke's awareness of this background therefore helps to explain why he presents this detached vignette with a peaceful and secure spirit untroubled by questions or doubts about the inner transformation and lasting effects produced in the sinner by her meeting with the Saviour. For this evangelist the Jesus of the earthly ministry and the Christ of the Church (in Acts) is man's eternal contemporary, 'the same yesterday, today, yes, and forever':³ both in his dealings with the woman of the gospel and in his dealings with every christian believer.

Advertence to this interaction between the apostolic teaching and the historical event in the ministry of Jesus brings into relief the profound transformation which God's grace effects in every person who accepts it. Through age-long developments in theology, the concept of grace has been refined to points so sharp that, often enough, the vital experience of grace as a personal encounter between God and man has suffered in popular thought from the cutting edge of the theological scalpel. People tend to look upon grace as a 'thing', and only too easily forget that it is God's own gift (*charis*) of his Son who, through the activity of his Spirit, awakens man to accept Jesus as Saviour and to live with him the family life of the Trinity. Without intending any denigration of the necessary and painstaking work of theological acumen, we suggest that the way to wholeness of vision is to be found in pondering the reality of grace as St Luke and the early catechists understood it. Wonder and love always follow when we meditate on the New

³ Heb 13, 8.

Testament which is our light, our strength and our life. It is to God's word we must always return.

God's gift of Christ to the heart of man

The whole lucan account revolves around the single fact that Jesus was present at the feast in the house of Simon the Pharisee. The acclaim which the young teacher from Nazareth had previously received prompted Simon to invite him, either out of curiosity or as a gesture of respect.⁴ A city prostitute also made herself obvious, not because she had been invited but because the gala occasion opened the door to whoever wanted to circulate among the guests, in order to hear the conversation or to receive a few morsels of food. The fact that she brought an alabaster jar of ointment and directly sought out Jesus, shows that she too had been deeply touched by his words and intended to express to this man of God her new-felt sentiments before Yahweh who had sent him.⁵ One wonders if she had previously heard his comforting words, 'It is not those who are well who need the doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the virtuous, but sinners to repentance'.⁶

But how different was the welcome Jesus received from the host of the banquet and the uninvited guest. With sterile stand offishness Simon studied him as a man to be measured by pharisee standards for the proper conduct of a prophet. Failing to dwarf himself to these narrow norms, Jesus was not received by Simon as a gift but only as a disappointment. For the woman it was just the opposite. Looking upon him she saw a man of God, sent to herself by the gracious and merciful Yahweh. The instinctiveness with which she threw herself at his feet may have been prompted by her remembrance of words she had heard long ago in the synagogue, 'how beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news'.⁷ In her eyes Jesus was God's messenger, a divine gift through whom she could once more become acceptable to the Holy One whom she had offended.

Scripture does not tell us why a man like Simon was blind and

⁴ Cf Lk 4, 22, 32, 36-39, 42-44.

⁵ Here we follow the text just as St Luke has written it. The fact that some exegetes consider the alabaster jar as a borrowing from the markan-matthean tradition of another event (Mk 14, 3ff; Mt 26, 6ff; cf Jn 12, 1-8), instead of lessening the value of Luke's narrative, heightens its didactic impact. With the additional detail of the jar of alabaster (and the consequent anointing of the feet) Luke enhances the full devotedness of the woman's ministrations to Jesus.

⁶ Lk 5, 31-32.

⁷ Isai 52, 7.

why a woman like the prostitute had eyes to see. It centres all attention on the simple truth that the seeing eye and the hearing ear, the power to accept Jesus as Saviour, are the gift of the gratuitous and merciful love of God. St Paul makes this clear. Writing to converts who had accepted Christ, he avoids all discussion of the why and the wherefore of divine predestination and, instead, affirms simply that the very fact of their conversion proves that God has been personally active in their lives:

We know, brethren, that God loves you and that you have been chosen, because when we brought the Good News to you, it came to you not in words only, but as the power of the holy Spirit and as utter conviction.⁸

For St Luke and the early catechists, the woman's conversion, like that of every christian, had its total cause in God's gracious gift of Christ Jesus, and in the living and loving faith with which God empowered her to receive him. According to St Luke's theology, the fact that this gift came into the life of the woman as someone whom she could see was no different from the fact that this same gift came into the life of the christian through the word he could hear. What Jesus was through physical presence in the Gospel of Luke, this is what he always is through the preaching of the Good News in the lucan Acts of the Apostles. For this evangelist and all the early preachers, the incarnate Word (with a capital W) was always present in the preached word (with the small w). Let a man receive the Good News of all that God had accomplished through the person and work of his Son, and immediately, like the converted sinner of Luke's Gospel, he would find Christ, the gift of God, 'dwelling in his heart' because of his response in faith.⁹

The new heart and the new spirit

From the beginning to the end of his story, Luke portrays an intimate inter-personal encounter between Jesus and the woman. Even the silences of this scene are meaningful. The wordless calm with which the Prophet accepts the woman's devoted ministrations, and the wordless wonder with which she listens to him, are as eloquent as the active services of her sorrow and gratitude, and his words of defence and approval. Throughout the story the woman remains at his feet; but it is evident that a strong bond of mutual

⁸ 1 Thes 1, 4-5.

⁹ Cf Eph 3, 17; Jn 14, 23.

understanding and esteem sets them apart from every other guest as sharing a life all their own.

Prior to this time Prophet and sinner had lived far apart, each in the world of his own making. Whether or not she was only a victim, the woman like a moth had been burned and disfigured by scorching flame. He, on the other hand, had always known such perfect integrity of character that he could challenge his most bitter critics with the confident charge, 'Which one of you can convict me of sin?'¹⁰ Even when he quietly accepted what seemed maudlin in the woman's emotional outbursts, Simon did not dare find fault with him as a prophet failing to act with the moral propriety of a 'man of God'; his only demur denied to Jesus a prophet's clairvoyance as a 'man of the Spirit': and this, simply because he did not share Simon's own myopic vision.

The obvious new bond between the sinless One and the sinful woman shows that, through her devoted acceptance of him, a thorough purification and a profound transformation altered her whole personality. In committing herself to God's spokesman, she experienced the fulfilment of Ezechiel's promise of a new covenant with Yahweh: 'I shall pour clean water over you and you will be cleansed; I shall cleanse you of all your defilement and . . . I shall give you a new heart, and put a new spirit in you'.¹¹ By her saving encounter with the holy Son of God she became clean: not as dead, dry sand is clean, but as living water is clean and teeming with life. The very words of Jesus speak of her transformation both as a purification and a new-found dynamic power of love: 'I tell you that her sins, her many sins, must have been forgiven her, or she would not have shown so much love' (v 47).

For the teachers of the early Church, this radical change in the woman who was a sinner offered an instructive and inspiring image of how the acceptance of Christ through baptismal faith touches the heart at its deepest centre to change its orientations radically. Indeed, if the woman could make so total a response, prompted only by a blurred understanding of Jesus as the gift of God, how much more full should be the response of a christian who knows the total mystery of Christ as the consubstantial Son of the Father, 'who died for our sins and rose for our justification'.¹² Writing to the Ephesians, St Paul reminds them how they were completely changed when, accepting the presence of Christ in the gospel message, they

¹⁰ Jn 8, 46.

¹¹ Ezek 36, 25-26.

¹² Rom 4, 25.

experienced the transforming power of his redemptive love:

Time was when you were dead in your sins and wickedness . . . We too were once God's rebel subjects: we all lived our lives in sensuality, and obeyed the promptings of our own instincts and ideas. In our natural condition we, like the rest, lay under the dreadful judgment of God. But God, rich in mercy, for the great love he bore us, brought us to life with Christ . . .; it is by his grace we are saved.¹³

Free with the freedom of Christ

Always in reading Luke's story one marvels at the woman's audacity before God and her courage in the presence of men. As a Jewess, she should have felt an instinctive awe before the messenger of Yahweh. It would have come natural to her, like the woman suffering from the flow of blood, to hold back from touching any part of him except the fringe of his cloak.¹⁴ Even more, as a sinful Jewess, she should have felt the craven fear of the sidonian woman who dreaded lest the too near presence of Yahweh's prophet Elijah should bring to light the sinfulness which calls for Yahweh's punishment.¹⁵ But, instead of shrinking from divine holiness, the sinner in Luke's story is almost reckless in manifesting her pent-up feelings. With tears of repentance and mute gestures of grateful love, she poured out upon Yahweh's prophet all the devotedness of a heart too full to speak to Yahweh himself.

As less fervent in spirit we might say that this display took courage in the face of what men would think of the seeming impropriety of her behaviour. The simple truth is that the woman gave no thought to what people would think or say. The change in her was so complete that she felt no other concern than her burning desire to express, through her ministries to his messenger, her total commitment to Yahweh. Jesus himself, speaking of her action, affirms that the driving motive of her devotedness to him was her great love of God. Twice in his words of defence (vv 42,47) he describes her action as a manifestation of *agapan* (love), the word which features in the Great Commandment, 'Thou shalt love (*agapēseis*) the Lord thy God'.¹⁶ It was this love which made her, before God and in the presence of men, utterly free with the freedom of Christ's own Spirit.

Thus her story served the early catechists as a model of all chris-

¹³ Eph 2, 1-5.

¹⁴ Cf Mt 9, 20-21.

¹⁵ Cf 1 Kg 17, 18.

¹⁶ Lk 7, 42. 47.

tian life. They taught their converts, especially those coming from judaism, that they must put away their old, fearful thoughts of a God afar off. In receiving Christ, his ineffable gift, they received an irrefutable proof of God's personal love for them. Hence their new life had to be free of 'the slave's spirit of fear' and, instead, to be supple with the trustful spirit of beloved children who follow the prompting of their heart to cry out, 'Abba, Father'.¹⁷ This was the word which Jesus himself used in addressing his Father. No one else but God's own Son could have thought of a title so tender, so confident and childlike. Its real meaning is 'Daddy', 'Papa', 'dear Father'. United to Christ as a brother, the christian too has a perfect right and pressing need to use this title and to live constantly in its spirit.

In the days of the Old Covenant only the high priest could enter into the holy of holies where God dwelt: and this, only once a year, on the day of expiation. But through Christ all this has changed. He has torn down every wall of separation, so that all who have received him with faith may enter with him at any moment into the gracious presence of his Father. Again and again the early teachers emphasized this comforting truth: 'Through our Lord Jesus Christ and by our faith-acceptance of him we are acceptable to God and are at peace with him, since it is by faith and through Jesus that we have access to the sphere of God's grace, where we now stand'.¹⁸ 'Let us be confident, then, in approaching the throne of grace, that we shall have mercy from him and find grace when we are in need of help'.¹⁹

If union with Christ gives the christian a spirit of trusting and generous freedom in dealing with God, how much more it should make him courageous before men. The New Testament writers describe this characteristic with the word, *parresia*. Its meaning covers every aspect of fearless and self-giving service of God in a world that is often adverse. Whether it is Peter and John insisting on their need to affirm the truths of God even when these thwart human susceptibilities,²⁰ or Paul speaking the word 'in season and out of season', or the ordinary christian giving full-hearted witness to God by word and deed: all of these activities are alive with the same *parresia* which strengthened the heart of the sinful woman when, without a thought for the opinion of men, she wept over the feet of Jesus, kissed them and anointed them with her precious oil.

¹⁷ Cf Rom 8, 14-15.

¹⁸ Rom 5, 1-2.

¹⁹ Heb 4, 16.

²⁰ Cf Acts 4, 19-20.

Love strong as death

As we said in beginning this study, the Gospel of Luke contains no allusion to an aftermath of the scene in the house of Simon. Probably the evangelist knew nothing of the later course of the woman's life; and certainly this ignorance did not trouble him. Like all other apostles and teachers of the Church, he had a tremendous confidence in the lasting power of christian transformation as the gracious work of God himself. St Paul gives expression to this conviction when he writes to the Philippians, 'I am certain that the one who began this good work in you will see that it is finished when the day of Christ Jesus comes'.²¹ Teachers like Paul took it for granted that 'God never takes back his gifts or revokes his choice'.²² St John, in his writings, is especially emphatic in guaranteeing that the life given to the christian through Christ is 'eternal life'. With optimistic confidence he holds as certain that 'no one who has been begotten by God sins; because God's seed remains inside him, he cannot sin when he has been begotten by God'.²³ In the same way all the New Testament writers affirm that the christian life should have only a forward movement, and that all momentum must follow the law of uniform acceleration in laying hold more and more of Christ who has first laid hold of us.²⁴

It cannot be otherwise. Just as the initial baptismal response to God's gift of his Son is prompted and made strong by the working of the Spirit of Jesus, so too the Spirit constantly abides with the christian to remind him of his sonship, to illumine the way he is to walk, and to strengthen his steps to keep pace with Christ the wayfarer. The whole theology of the Church on actual grace is but a lengthy translation of the simple words of St Paul: 'It is God who works in you, inspiring both the will and the deed, for his own chosen purpose'.²⁵

All this is the meaning of the mystery of Christ. From the first moment of conversion until its final consummation, he who is God's ineffable gift to men is the constant support of every stage of christian life. In his poem, *The Waste Land*, T. S. Eliot expresses this truth with haunting and unforgettable words:

²¹ Phil 1, 6.

²² Rom 11, 29.

²³ 1 Jn 3, 9.

²⁴ Cf Phil 3, 12-15; Heb 10, 25.

²⁵ Phil 2, 13.

Who is the third who walks always beside you?
When I count, there are only you and I together –
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded
I do not know whether a man or woman
– But who is that on the other side of you?

Certainly the early teachers of the Church often found it necessary to remonstrate against back-sliding and to speak their strictures against infidelity. But all of their remonstrances and rebukes are directed against christians who have deliberately cultivated forgetfulness, dulled present awareness, and smothered the flame of desire. These are the only ways in which life's aftermath can come to belie life's beginnings.

Conclusion

The calm confidence with which St Luke tells the story of the sinful woman's first meeting with Jesus seems to indicate his assured hope that the rich promise in this encounter would achieve its perfect fulfilment. Because he sees the end of her life already contained in this beginning, as the flower in the seed, his story of her conversion stands forever as a paradigm for all christian life. Let a person ponder what the sinner did in the house of Simon and let him live constantly with her spirit: this is to make every day a new life, a whole life, and perhaps one's last chance to give to God.