When Heather got us together online last week to talk about sharing out Holy Week services across Presbytery I was hoping to get Holy Saturday, but I was slow out of the blocks and got there too late! But I was just as happy taking Holy Wednesday because I love the story we look at this evening, the story we read earlier from Luke 7:35ff.

I first preached on this story when I was a student minister working for the summer in Arran. With its high mountains and rolling farmland, people often say that Arran is Scotland in miniature. Well, this story – for me – is the gospel in miniature. Everything we need to know about the gospel is found in Jesus’ encounter with this woman and although most Bibles head this passage ‘Jesus anointed by a sinful woman’, I prefer to give her a kinder name and think of her as ‘the penitent woman’.

Let’s watch her as she makes her way along the cobbled streets that evening, trying to remain incognito. What possessed her to leave the safety of her home to go to a place where she would likely face verbal and maybe even physical abuse? Jesus was her purpose. She knew he was attending a dinner at the home of Simon the Pharisee and she desperately wanted to see him.

Wealthier homes in those days would have had an open courtyard at the centre of the home, where meals could be taken in the evening air, and it was understood that people could come and go as they pleased when they had an important guest along, like Jesus. So it was easy enough for her to slip in. But as people begin to recognise her and catch her eye, the voices trail away as she takes her place behind Jesus and begins to weep uncontrollably – wetting his feet with her tears, and then – shockingly – drying them with her hair before anointing them with oil and blessing them with kisses. She was giving Jesus all the welcome which Simon the Pharisee should have given him as a guest but had failed to do – a low level snub indicating that Jesus was being admitted to their company, but not really welcomed.

What’s going on in this story?

One reading is that the woman was trying to *earn* forgiveness through this show of sorrow. And some translations leave you with that impression *– “Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven - for she loved much”* Luke 7:47 (NIV) At best, that’s ambiguous. But other translations make it much clearer – the NRSV says *“Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven;* ***hence*** *she has shown great love”* (Luke 7:47, NRSV) and the Jerusalem Bible says *‘her sins, her many sins, must have been forgiven her,* ***or*** *she would not have shown such great love”.* (Luke 7:47, JB)

I don’t think she’s there to *receive* forgiveness; I think she’s there to thank him for the forgiveness she’s *already begun to know.*

We actually know very little about this woman, and this story. We’re not even sure which town it took place in; but if she’d followed Jesus around over the previous few days or weeks she’d have heard him say things *like ‘what good is it if you only love the people who love you? Don’t even the pagans do that? Instead, I tell you - love your enemies. In that way you’ll show yourselves to be God’s children, because he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful as your father is merciful’.*

No-one had heard this kind of teaching before. And maybe in the week, as she had watched and listened to Jesus, she began to believe she wasn’t the object of God’s hatred; despite all she’d done and all she’d become, she was still the object of his love. Perhaps when God looked at her, it wasn’t with anger – but with sorrow, and compassion and mercy. Maybe he still saw her as his beloved daughter, and maybe she could become that woman again, with his help. That was the hope that this Jesus was holding out to her. That God was merciful.

When I was researching for this evening I came across the words of an ancient hymn from the 9th century called the Hymn of Kassiani after the woman who wrote it. It tells this story from the perspective of the penitent woman, and we’ll listen to it shortly. There’s a lovely line in it which says: *“Once Eve heard the sound of thy footsteps in Paradise in the cool of the day. In fear she hid herself. But now I will tenderly embrace those pure feet and wipe them with the hair of my head.”*

Eve, in sin, hid herself. She’d come to fear God’s wrath and doubt his love. She turned away from him. But tonight, we see a reversal of that story. Coming to believe that God can have mercy, even in our sin, the penitent woman turns towards him in faith. Christ has helped her understand that first and foremost, God is a merciful Father, not the angry judge of the Pharisees. And that is the very beginning of her finding her way back to God.

And so, as I’ve studied this story over the years, I’ve come to think that her tears aren’t just tears of sorrow – I think they’re also tears of gratitude for the mercy she’s *already* begun to receive.

There’s a story told about a soldier who went to see a monk to ask him if God could forgive him for all the wrong things he’d done. *“Tell me – when you rip your cloak, do you throw it away?”* asked the monk. *“Well, no I mend it and use it again”* said the soldier. *“If you’re so careful with your cloak, don’t you think God will be just as careful with his creatures?”* replied the monk.

The gospel that Jesus brings doesn’t say *‘sort your life out and God will love you.’* It says *‘God loves you – so sort your life out.’* That’s the good news that touched that woman’s heart all those years ago; and that’s the good news we’ve been entrusted with for the sake of the whole world.

Thanks be to God. Amen