

## Homily for the Eleventh Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C) (13/06/10)

Today's gospel reading tells the story of the interaction between three people: Jesus, Simon the Pharisee, and an unnamed woman. Jesus is the catalyst who causes the woman to act, although she does not speak, and causes Simon to speak, although he does not act. Fundamentally, it is a story about perception, about seeing. What do the actors in this drama see?

The woman is not a guest at the meal. It was the custom to dine on such occasions with the doors open, so she simply finds her way in. She says nothing to the host, she says nothing to Jesus; in fact, throughout the story she says nothing at all. She does not acknowledge Simon, the host, in fact she does not seem to notice anything or anyone apart from Jesus. She sees in him something extraordinary, she sees in him a source of forgiveness, and therefore of new life, new hope, new opportunities. He represents for her a chance to break free from the past, and to rediscover the dignity that belongs to every human person. He breaks for her a cycle of despair, self-loathing, isolation and fear, and he offers her the chance to become as pure, as fresh as a new-born child. Such an opportunity is too good to miss, and it drives her to her knees in gratitude. It is pretty clear that the gospel's coy reference to her 'bad name' means that she is a prostitute, someone who sells 'fake love', sham passion, to the highest bidder. Perhaps for the first time she has found true love, she has discovered what it is to be loved as a person rather than desired as an object, and this has enabled her to throw away her fake, imitation acts of love, and to show the real thing instead. She has seen in Jesus a mirror that reflects not what everyone else sees, on the surface, but the truth that lies beneath.

Simon sees a woman that he knows, by reputation at least, and it is her reputation that matters most to him. Nothing else about her matters to him, nothing of her history or her personality, nothing of her joys or sorrows, nothing of her hopes or fears, nothing of the real person that lies beneath the surface. He is trapped in the world of sense, where all that matters is what you can see, and the hidden, deeper mysteries do not matter at all. She has a bad reputation, and that is all that matters. There is no need to discover any more. Turning to Jesus, he is disappointed. He had asked Jesus to his house because he thought perhaps here was someone special, here was a prophet who could open up some new insights, new discoveries. But Jesus does not even know what sort of woman this is. "If this man were a prophet he would know who this woman is...what a bad name she has". Simon thinks he knows all there is to know about her, but in fact he is blinded by his own prejudice. He knows about her reputation, and that's enough, it is a kind of brick wall that he cannot see beyond, it prevents him taking any further interest.

The irony, of course, is that Jesus does indeed know who this woman is. Simon sees a woman with a bad reputation, and thinks that means he knows who she is; Jesus sees a precious child of God: damaged, yes, weak, yes, flawed, yes, but God's precious and much-loved daughter all the same. Jesus knows and understands

her far better than Simon does, for he is indeed a prophet, and far more than a prophet.

This is a story about perception, about seeing. The woman does not seem to see Simon at all; perhaps she has met him and his type so often before that she knows to expect little from him. She sees Jesus, and recognizes in him something that she has not come across before, someone who will treat her as a woman worthy of dignity and respect, a woman who deserves a chance at experiencing, and showing, real love. Simon sees a woman with a bad name, and a man who is so different from him that he cannot believe he can have anything to say, cannot believe he is worth listening to.

So, in this story about perception, about seeing, what does Jesus see? He sees two sinners, two people who each in their own way has failed to live life fully as children made in the image and likeness of God. He sees two people destined for glory, two people who according to God's dreams are bound for perfect fulfillment, but who have somehow managed, as we all do one way or another, to mess it all up. The only difference for Jesus is that the woman realizes all this, and wants to start again, whereas Simon cannot see his own faults. Jesus knows about the woman's failures, but does not need to mention them because it is very clear that she knows them herself, that she has faced up to them and wants to leave them behind. Simon's failures, his failure of hospitality, his judgementalism, his cynicism, must all be brought to light, however, because he seems to be blissfully unaware of them.

The woman sees Jesus for what he really is, someone who at last will show her real love, and will also allow her to love him; furthermore, she sees her own faults and failures as they really are. Jesus sees two sinners, one on the way to repentance and freedom from the power of sin, the other still enslaved by self-righteousness and in need of having his eyes opened. Simon sees a man who disappoints him, who fails to live up to his own image of what a prophet should be, and a woman who is scarcely worth noticing at all. The gospels use again and again the image of blindness to illustrate our inability to perceive the world as it really is. This theme appears throughout the scriptures: the prophet Nathan has had to lift the scales from David's eyes, because David had fooled himself into thinking that he was entitled to take Bathsheba for his own and he has to be shaken into seeing that he who had been given so much has rebelled and stolen what was not his: "I have given you...but you have taken." So much of our Catholic faith, our Catholic way of life, hinges on our ability to see things as they truly are, not distorted by our prejudices, our sinfulness, the flaws and failures of our present age. Catholic writer George Weigel wrote "Learning to see things aright here is how we become the kind of people who can see and love God for ever" (Letters to a Young Catholic p. 18). This is something very important, and it is one of the graces that flows from the sacraments. In the sacraments, above all at the mass, we are driven to look below the surface, beyond the obvious, to try a little harder, to see things, and people, through God's eyes. This is one of the many reasons why we come to mass week after week: it keeps us in touch with invisible reality, it opens our eyes to the world as it really is.