

# Guess Who's Coming to Dinner>

## Luke 7:36-50

I haven't been to many dinner parties in recent years. I've been invited out to people's homes for dinner plenty of times, but the occasion hasn't been called a dinner party, rather a meal, or a catch-up. It could be that a dinner party reeks of formality, and most of us are much more comfortable in a casual, down to earth environment. Either that or we simply don't have the time to go to the effort that a dinner party requires: the finest cutlery and crockery, the best tablecloth and table decorations, at least three exquisite courses, matched with the finest of wine. All of which can take the edge off the enjoyment of the night.



Be in no doubt that Jesus was invited to a proper dinner party. Simon the Pharisee would have known how to impress his guests as one of the pillars of his local community. Here was a chance to hear more from the man everyone was talking about. Perhaps Simon hoped that in return for his invitation his guests would hear an interesting and thought provoking after-dinner speech from Jesus. He got that, and a whole lot more. This was a dinner party for the ages.

This meal would have been much less formal than a modern dinner party. To start with, it wasn't a sit down meal, but a recline-around meal. And it would have taken place in full view of passers by. People were free to come and go. Sometimes the wrong kind of people. Like the woman who suddenly appears standing behind Jesus. We know quite a lot about her. Luke simply describes her as 'a sinner.' Not his judgement perhaps, but it's the label that the Pharisees attach to her. She is someone who has tracked Jesus down. She may have met him or have heard his teachings, and she is motivated, captivated even, to find him again. Thirdly, she has come with a specific action in mind: to show Jesus how his words and actions have impacted on her life. She has brought with her an alabaster jar of perfume.

I expect that no one noticed her at first. All the men were too busy in conversation, trying to tell the tallest story or score the winning point in an argument. "As she stood behind Jesus at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears' Why is she crying? Are these tears of sorrow or tears of joy? And why is she washing Jesus feet? Should not the host, Simon, have provided a bowl of water for this purpose?

Now she has the attention of all the guests. Is this a woman of ill-repute, of loose morals, the kind of women these men





publicly disdain but privately long for? “She wiped Jesus’ feet with her hair, kissed them, and poured perfume on them.” For a woman to let her hair down in public was a sign of great immodesty. But she was beyond shame. Reputation didn’t matter. Nor did the reaction of the other guests. All that mattered was Jesus’ himself. And the words and actions that turned her life around.

Jesus says nothing. He simply receives what she does, without any rebuff or discomfort. This in itself is a gift to her. But it is his lack of reaction that Simon cannot bear. We know what he’s thinking. “If this man were a prophet, he would have known what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner.” Simon obviously figures that Jesus is not what he claims to be, because he can’t read the clear signs: that this woman is a sinner. The responsibility of a religious person was to separate oneself from such people and situations.

Sadly, Simon has badly misjudged Jesus, from the very beginning. The way he responds to the mini-parable Jesus shares with him is condescending. “Yes, of course, the person who has had the greater debt forgiven will love the one who has forgiven it more than the other.” He treats even this word as an academic exercise. Jesus is about to skewer him.



It’s this woman, this uninvited, unexpected, unwanted guest who has shown Simon up. She has greeted Jesus as the honoured guest he is. Her act of love shows that she truly welcomes Jesus as a prophet. Her tears are the right reaction to the presence of the holy God in flesh and bone. Anointing Jesus’ feet and wiping them with her hair shows the depth of her gratitude for the love of God she has experienced in Jesus. Simon, on the other hand, seems to have treated Jesus’ visit as a kind of experiment. He didn’t extend to Jesus any of the usual courtesies that a guest receives. There was no water to wash dusty feet, no kiss of greeting, no oil to put on his head to celebrate.



Jesus draws the parable to its shocking conclusion “Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.” She loves wastefully because she has experienced the fullness of God’s forgiving love. “But Simon, your love is limited, conditional, a reflection of your hard heart and your calculating attitude. You think you have God figured out, and that you can manage him, and your son. You don’t understand how much he loves you, because you don’t think you need that love.”

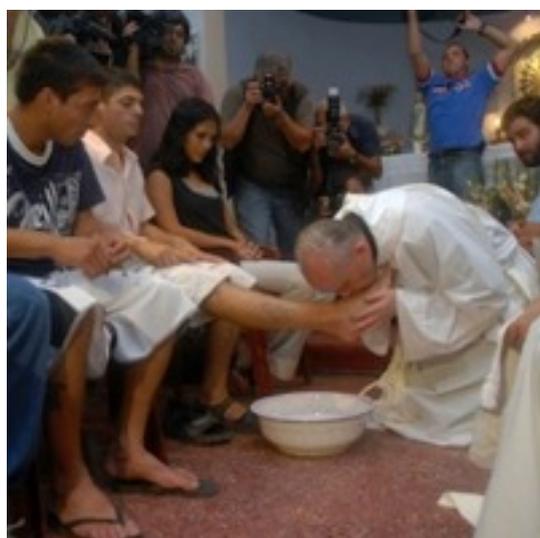
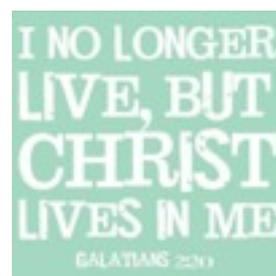
What has it been like to been a guest at this dinner party? Have you found this woman’s display of love distasteful, disturbing? Is it too much love, too much passion, too much thanks? Have you found yourself nodding in agreement with Simon? I know Simon well. It is so easy to be a detached observer of the good news that Jesus brings. So easy to be full of justifications for my selfish behaviour, for my judgements about others, for the conviction that I’m in the right.

For you and I to think that we have little to be forgiven for is the greatest lie. The opposite is true, as David attests in Psalm 32: “How happy are those who no longer lie-to themselves or anyone else. When we refuse to admit our sin, it eats away at us, little by little, weakening us in body and soul.” I’d like to think that Simon was sliced open by Jesus’ words, and by the example of this woman’s gratitude.



The miracle of God’s love is extended not just to this woman but also to you and I. When we approach God with a broken and contrite heart, God rushes in with his word of forgiveness. The very same word that turned this woman’s life around, and provoked this outpouring of thanks and praise. . “Your sins are forgiven...Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

The Apostle Paul heard these words too, and they set his life on a new course. The persecutor of the church became the preacher of Christ. The one rusted on to the law as the way to God became the champion of the good news of freedom in Christ. What he says is true for us: “I have been crucified with Christ; and it no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”



On Maundy Thursday this year, only a few weeks after his election, Pope Francis washed and kissed the feet of twelve inmates of the Casal Del Marmo, a juvenile detention centre in Rome. Many people were shocked that two of the twelve young people were women and even worse, that one of them was a Muslim. Among the group were gypsies and North African Immigrants.

Critics within the Roman Catholic church were quick to pounce on the fact that he didn’t wash the feet of 12 handpicked priests. One said, “How can the pope maintain discipline in the church if he himself does not conform himself to prevailing ecclesiastical legislation?” Another wrote: “Something is profoundly wrong when the winds of change can blow so swiftly through an

immutable institution of God’s own making.” Taking on the name of St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of the poor, was a sign that dangerous and unpredictable times were ahead, like celebrating mass in this prison.

When the service was finished Pope Francis addressed the gathering in the gym of the penitentiary with these words: “...thank you boys and girls, for your welcome today I am happy to be with you. Go forward, alright? And do not let yourselves be robbed of hope, do not let yourselves be robbed of hope! Understood? Always with hope. Go forward!”



Jesus' words gave hope to a woman trapped in a hopeless situation. Jesus' word today gives hope to saints who struggle to triumph over their sinful nature. "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." Jesus calls us to speak words of hope to fellow strugglers. Amen.