

I don't know how this topic came about and I don't think it's by chance that I'm speaking about this: "The despised woman". There have been times in my life where I've felt like a "despised woman". For different reasons perhaps to the woman that we're looking at in Luke 7:37. And I just want to say a little bit and just forgive me if I get into, kind of like, theological mode here (I'm not going to stay there), but there are similar stories in the other gospels. But this one's different in the sense that it talks about a sinful woman. She's not really named in this passage and in the others people speculate and have thought that it was Mary that was speaking in the other passages, but here, it's very clear in Luke and in the narrative in Luke, that she's the resident of the town that Jesus is speaking in. And because she's called sinful and called a sinner – we're not really told what her sin is but we can kind of think that she might have been a prostitute because of the way that she's described and the words that have been used to describe her. And we know that women particularly in those days didn't have a lot of power (and some may argue that even today we may have more power but we still have less power than some of our male counterparts – don't stone me, you can talk to me, you can tackle me about that after the service). And we know that basically she was excluded, she's looked down upon, she was really not welcomed, people didn't want to associate themselves with her, she was ostracised, and so she was despised.

We don't know why she got into the position that she was in. When you get into certain positions people always speculate and sometimes you're judged because you've got into a certain position. You may have got yourself into a position of debt and then when you're having to deal with the authorities, or deal with some of your associates, they start to question you and ask you why you've got yourself into that position, and start to judge you and say that you haven't really been a good steward of your finances. And so this was happening to this woman in a different context: nobody knows why she's had to go down the pathway that she went down, but yet they judged and they despised her.

She's probably broken inside as well. She's got herself into a mode of survival. I've had sisters that have survived war-torn countries and when they tell you the things that they've had to do to survive: they've become refugees and how they had to get themselves and their children out of a particular country and the dangers that they've been exposed to and the insults and the humiliation and the degradation that they've had to experience – I can't engage with that on an intellectual level, I have to be able to engage with that with compassion and to engage with that on a heart level.

I want to tell you something else about this woman. She had tenacity, she was brain because she went into a place where she was despised and didn't want to be seen but she made her way to the front so that she could get Jesus' attention. Hallelujah! (I'm gonna say hallelujah, if you're not going to say hallelujah I say them for you. You used to me by now aren't you Woodside; got a love me too you know: I love you anyway.) She was shunned by people, judged by people and who knows what was going on inside of her, but that woman who was called sinful when she heard that Jesus was going to be in that house she got there.

Many of us endure things that are not even as bad, and we can hardly get ourselves to church – we can hardly get ourselves in the place to really be, you know have a worshipful attitude towards the Lord because we allow things to try and hinder us.

But she got inside and it was the custom that when the teachers were teaching – the Rabbis were teaching – that they'd let people in. But the Pharisee that was hosting Jesus started to make a judgement. And I want to say to you that this woman, what she did was an act of love. She demonstrates the guts. And I see similar traits of a woman in the Old Testament called Rahab – we all know about Rahab, don't we? When Joshua and his soldiers were about to take the walls of Jericho she let them into her house, and I want to tell you something about Rahab as well: she was despised, the women hated her because some of their husbands had been with her, perhaps. And nobody likes prostitutes because they go where others don't want to go.

But she had a place that was strategic and even her very name, Rahab, means extended in the Hebrew. So already God was working on her behalf and extending her territory. But she says something quite interesting to Joshua and the men, the spies. She says that I know that your Lord will deliver you because I've heard of all the things that you've been through and all the things that you have accomplished through your God. So already in her state and in her despised state she had face. And so she said, "Save my family and I'll hide you."

So getting back to our despised woman. She bought a jar of perfume and stood behind him at his feet weeping. Have you wet at the feet of Jesus? Do you know what it means to be so broken up and torn up that you have wept metaphorically at the feet of our Lord?

I went to a situation: I was at school – I'll tell you this story first. I grew up in Bedfordshire, as I've said to you before on many occasions, and I went to school in an area of Bedford called Queens Park (the queen was supposed to have visited it – I don't know how true that is but it's called Queens Park) and I went to a school called Westfield School in the Weston area of that part of Bedford. And the time I was growing up we had people that were coming: my parents had come from the Caribbean, we had people that have come from Eastern Europe. And we'd all merged in that area because there was quite a few industries (there was the brickworks, there's iron and steel industry at that time) and so many people came to that part of the country because of those Industries. And I was at school and I remember the subject of Humanities was just being introduced and so we were one of the first year that did, instead of doing History, Geography and RE as separate subjects we did Humanities. And so I was there minding my own business and whatever, and it came to the end of year reports and I got my report, took it home to my mum.

And anybody knows about Caribbean parents and African parents they are going to scrutinise that report and so my family were no exception; and my mum (and my father had died and so my mum was bringing us up by herself and so there was even more scrutiny – yes, ok, I don't need to go on). So anyway when it come to this subject now the teacher had given me a "C5", and my mum was saying "What is this: a 'C5'? Below average and a '5'" You had 1 to 5 grades, and 1 was the highest grade and 5 was lowest; so she'd given me an average grade and a number 5. So my mum was livid and she said to me "What's happened here? Why have you got this grade?" She knows that I've been doing my homework because she checked it – ok? She knew I was good at RE 'cause she taught me herself – she didn't let me get away: I know the King James version like the back of my hand, and that's because of my mum, and that was what RE was about in those days. She knew that perhaps Geography I was a little weak on, with directions and whatever, but she still thought that didn't warrant me getting such a low grade. She went through my books and I had B+s, I had As and all of that kind of thing, and she wondered why on earth I got such a low grade. And she empowered me enough to go and challenge the teacher.

So off I went and you know in those days the teacher was always right! In the time when I grew up they were always right, and they were people of authority. So I went and I spoke to her, I

remember her and she said to me: she gave me back grade because she thought I was copying the girl next to me and that really I wasn't a good student - I wasn't that good - and that I'd been copying the girl next to me, and that I was really struggling student. Can you imagine how I felt? And when I challenged her she was very defensive; she didn't want a young black girl to be challenging her and so she was very defensive, wanted to dismiss me and was quite rude actually. So I said to her: well for the rest of the year I don't want to sit next to this girl, let me sit in another seat. But the end of year everything had already gone wrong and so there's nothing much I could do about that grade for that year. The next year I got a different teacher - and obviously they communicate and they get all the grades and they get everything and they sort them out. But this teacher - and I praise God for her - wasn't judgemental. And the long and short of it is I endured that - all of that humiliation and everything - and came top out of my entire year the next year. And by the way my mum taught me to pray (that is one of the things that she told me: she taught me to pray) and she taught me to really believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. So when she was telling me to go and confront the teacher I had to do that prayerfully and really believe that God would see me through. And through that humiliation - it was humiliating, I felt despised, I felt jumped upon, I felt condescended, I felt all manner of things - and it was something that would have been difficult for me to recover. But we praise God that we serve a living God who despite any of your humiliations - any of your things that you go through, any of the condescension, anything that you go through - he is a living God and he will stand beside you and he will cover your back, and his grace and mercy is enduring.

And just like this woman here who was despised by society, excluded, ostracised and yet she went forward and did this great act of love by wiping Jesus' feet. She put to shame the Pharisee that had judged her because he didn't even receive Jesus in the right way that he should have.

I want to tell you another story which depicts. I happen to be part of a church denomination and one day this woman came into the service. She was dressed very scantily (and that's an understatement) and as she came into the church people moved away from her. The women started to talk about her; they started to judge her immediately: "couldn't she even get to church in better clothes?" "Couldn't she wear something better to church?" "Look at how she's coming into the House of God! Look how she's dressed!" This woman just ignored them; when they sang the song she was singing louder (was out of tune but louder) than anybody else, she was clapping and she was worshipping and ignoring them. But they were distracted, their own worship was distracted, because of what she had on - or hadn't on. So in this denomination, in this church, they have a section where they call it "Testimony time" - anybody come across that? Ah right, good, I'm not alone here...Testimony time - and up this woman jumped and gave her testimony and said that the Lord had brought her through: she'd been a gang mistress and the Lord had delivered her and saved her and she'd found her way to church that Sunday not even having proper clothes. But she found herself in the service; they had to repent of that judgement. And this is what Jesus says to the Pharisee, he says to the Pharisee that look if I've saved you and delivered you from something who's gonna love me more? If I've given you much who's gonna love me more? If I've redeemed you from lots of things or from a dark place who is gonna love me more?

This is an active love, my brothers and sisters and friends: today we need to learn to love the Lord and worship him regardless of any situation we find ourselves in. Sometimes the church has been a place of judgement rather than a place of refuge. And we need to experience and then demonstrate the love of God; not make judgements that are inaccurate but we need to embrace one another because you don't know where we're coming from, where each other has walked.

And until you have walked that journey you don't know. Sometimes we've become so isolated, we've built our own enclaves in the church, that we're divorced from Society, divorced from the needs that people have, when really we should be demonstrating the mercy of God and the love of God, and showing that God's Love is sure and that everyone is valued in Christ. Hallelujah! That there is nobody that is excluded under the banner of love in Christ: it doesn't matter where you've come from, what you done, it doesn't matter the mistakes that you've made, it doesn't matter whether you're black, white, green, yellow, fat, thin, tall, short! Hallelujah, praise God! We should be all embracing in the Kingdom of God because we're kingdom building, praise the name of the Lord! We shouldn't be despising people because they're a bit different from us, because they've come from a different direction, or they've come from, you know, when there's ... <suggestive action>

A friend of mine I was sharing with him what I was going to cook for a Christmas dinner and he said to me "Oh! Oh, that sounds quite posh!" So I said "Yes, that's because I am posh!" He just laughed his head off. But the point was made is that we shouldn't really make assumptions because God's love is for all. Amen? God's love is for all!

So my encouragement today is not for us to be like the Pharisee and start making judgements because someone is acting out their love. But we need to step out of our comfort zones and make sure that we receive people in the way that Christ would receive them, 'cause some of us are here just by his mercy and his grace. We been despised; I've been to places where I remember I was working for Lambeth and I was inspecting nurseries - nurseries and playgroups - and I went to this nursery which was on a church premises and I got there to do the inspection, and the woman put her head round the window and said "Oh you've come for the cleaning job." So I turned it in a bit of a joke and I said "Oh, I'm so sorry, I know that it's a bit windy and rainy and I'll look a bit dishevelled, but actually I've come to your inspection!" {laughs} Do you know what I mean?

Another time I went to this place, I was working as - what do I call it now: I'm supposed to be working with minorities and ethnic people that are excluded, ok, and helping them to come into the church and to take up and occupy different roles in the church. So I went to speak at this church to a group of their leaders, ok. So I got there and the secretary - again these secretaries, we need to pray for our secretaries...we really, we do need to pray for them, you have loads on you...that's a joke, there's some beautiful secretaries: I can't be without one, an administrator, they need to organise me - and so she said "Your lot aren't here tonight." So I said "My lot?" She goes "Yeah!" She goes "Yeah, your lot aren't here tonight, we're having a meeting and we're having someone speak to us, and your lot aren't here tonight!" So I said "Ok. I think you'll find that I'm the speaker!"

I've had my share you know - honestly I mean I can laugh about it now - but I tell you it's been some things. And then there's other things: I've been to church where they don't entertain women ministers where they've had all the male ministers on the platform and there no women are allowed on the platform, so you have to sit wherever and whatever. So I've been through all of that as well. I went to - actually it was Croydon council - I went to this ministers' fellowship and the person introducing it said "Oh, in case you don't know where all a group of guys that meet together on a regular basis." And then they called me to share (I was sharing something on Croydon) so I said "It's really wonderful, you know, I've never been called a 'guy' before!"

What do I say? The point I'm making (and we can laugh about it, and I've been glad that I've been able to deliver this with humour, but the point) is let's show God's love, let's not despise people.

The church is for everyone; Jesus is for everyone, God loves everyone. So when we're thinking about our missions, when we're thinking about our order of services, let's think about how we can include people, let's think about how we can include people with disabilities, let's think about how we can include people who speak a different language, let's think about how we can include people who are on the fringes of society, let's think about how we can include people that perhaps haven't been brought up in the way of, or have had no, family life and have been homeless and have been insecure for most of their lives; let's think about how we can be inclusive and show God's love, and not be like the Pharisee looking down on people and judging them because they're different and you don't know their back story.

I'm just going to pray right now.

Father in the name of Jesus I thank you for Woodside, I thank you that every time I've been here I've had such a great welcome. I thank you for this church family and I thank you Lord that you're you're growing this church. I thank you Lord that you're bringing people together, and even though we just been through a pandemic and we're trying to restore what we call "normality" - I don't know what that is - but Father God we are grateful that this family is intact; and Father God because this family is intact, and we thank you for wholeness in this family, that they are ready to have others, and to make others whole and join in this family. We thank you lord for your love. We thank you for your understanding that passes all human understanding. We thank you for your peace when it is not peaceful. And so Lord we give you thanks and we are in appreciation of what you're doing at Woodside, and we thank you Lord. And we thank you lord, and we speak prophetically Lord, that we will see great things, and more things, happening in this church.

Amen. Praise the Lord!