



*Jesus welcomes and defends
the woman with the ointment.
Poor people's trust in Jesus*
Luke 7:36 to 8:3

1. Opening prayer

Lord Jesus, send your Spirit to help us to read the Scriptures with the same mind that you read them to the disciples on the way to Emmaus. In the light of the Word, written in the Bible, you helped them to discover the presence of God in the disturbing events of your sentence and death. Thus, the cross that seemed to be the end of all hope became for them the source of life and of resurrection.

Create in us silence so that we may listen to your voice in Creation and in the Scriptures, in events and in people, above all in the poor and suffering. May your word guide us so that we too, like the two disciples from Emmaus, may experience the force of your resurrection and witness to others that you are alive in our midst as source of fraternity, justice and peace. We ask this of you, Jesus, son of Mary, who revealed to us the Father and sent us your Spirit. Amen.

2. Reading

a) A key to the reading:

The text of this Sunday's Gospel puts before us two related episodes. The first episode is quite emotional. A woman who was thought to be a sinner in the city, has the courage to go into Simon's house, a Pharisee, during a meal, to meet Jesus, wash his feet and cover them with kisses and ointment. The second episode describes Jesus' community of men and women.

As you read the text, imagine being in the Pharisee's house at table and look carefully at the attitudes, actions and words of those present, the woman, Jesus and the Pharisees. Read again the brief information that Luke gives concerning the community that grew around Jesus and try to examine carefully the words used to show that the community was made up of men and women who followed Jesus.

b) A division of the text to help with the reading:

Luke 7:36-38: A woman washes Jesus' feet in the house of a Pharisee

Luke 7:39-40: The Pharisee's reaction and Jesus' reply

Luke 7:41-43: The parable of the two debtors and the Pharisee's reply

Luke 7:44-47: Jesus applies the parable and defends the girl

Luke 7:48-50: Love generates forgiveness and forgiveness generates love

Luke 8:1-3: The men and women disciples of Jesus' community

c) Text:

36 One of the Pharisees invited Jesus to a meal. When he arrived at the Pharisee's house and took his place at table, 37 suddenly a woman came in, who had a bad name in the town. She had heard he was dining with the Pharisee and had brought with her an alabaster jar of ointment. 38 She waited behind him at his feet, weeping, and her tears fell on his feet, and she wiped them away with her hair; then she covered his feet with kisses and anointed them with the ointment.

39 When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would know who this woman is and what sort of person it is who is touching him and what a bad name she has.' 40 Then Jesus took him up and said, 'Simon, I have something to say to you.' He replied, 'Say on, Master.' 41 'There was once a creditor who had two men in his debt; one owed him five hundred denarii, the other fifty. 42 They were unable to pay, so he let them both off. Which of them will love him more?' 43 Simon answered, 'The one who was let off more, I suppose.' Jesus said, 'You are right.' 44 Then he turned to the woman and said to Simon, 'You see this woman? I came into your house, and you poured no water over my feet, but she has poured out her tears over my feet and wiped them away with her hair. 45 You gave me no kiss, but she has been covering my feet with kisses ever since I came in. 46 You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. 47 For this reason I tell you that her sins, many as they are, have been forgiven her, because she has shown such great love. It is someone who is forgiven little who shows little love.' 48 Then he said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven.' 49 Those who were with him at table began to say to themselves, 'Who is this man, that even forgives sins?' 50 But he said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace.'

8:1 Now it happened that after this he made his way through towns and villages preaching and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. With him went the Twelve, 2 as well as certain women who had been cured of evil spirits and ailments: Mary surnamed the Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, 3 Joanna the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, Susanna, and many others who provided for them out of their own resources.

3. A moment of prayerful silence

So that the Word of God may penetrate and enlighten our life.

4. Some Questions

to help us in our personal reflection.

a) What struck you most in the text? Why?

- b) What does the woman do and how does she do it?
- c) What is the Pharisee's attitude towards Jesus and towards the woman: what does he do and say?
- d) What is Jesus' attitude towards the woman: what does he do and say?
- e) The woman would not have done what she did unless she was absolutely certain that Jesus would welcome her. Do present day people who are marginalized have the same certainty in our regard as Christians?
- f) Love and forgiveness. Who are the women who follow Jesus? What binds them together?
- g) Jesus' community: Who are the women who follow Jesus? What do they do?

5. For those who wish to go deeper into the theme

- a) The literary and historical context of the text:

In chapter 7 of his Gospel, Luke describes the new and surprising things that happen among the people since Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God. In Capernaum, he praises the faith of the foreigner: "Amen I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such great faith!" (Lk 7:1-10). In Naim he raises the widow's son from death (Lk 7:11-17). The way Jesus proclaims the Kingdom surprises the Jewish brethren so that even John the Baptist is surprised and sends word to ask: "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" (Lk 7:18-30). Jesus criticises the wavering of his adversaries: "They are like children who do not know what they want!" (cfr. Lk 7:31-35). And here, at the end of the chapter, that is our text (Lk 7:36 to 8:3), something else that is new begins to appear and to surprise in the Good News of the Kingdom: Jesus' attitude towards women.

At the time of the New Testament in Palestine, women were marginalized. They took no part in the synagogue nor could they witness in public life. From the time of Ezra (IV century B.C.), resistance towards women kept growing as we note in the stories of Judith, Esther, Ruth, Naomi, Susanna, the Sulamite woman and many others. This resistance towards women did not find an echo in Jesus who welcomed them. In the episode of the woman with the ointment (Lk 7:36-50) we see anti-conformism in Jesus' welcome of the woman. In the description of the community that was growing around Jesus (Lk 8:1-3), we see men and women gathered around Jesus, equal in standing as disciples.

- b) A commentary on the text:

Luke 7:36-38: A woman washes Jesus' feet in the house of a Pharisee

Three totally different persons meet: Jesus, a Pharisee and a woman who was said to be a sinner. Jesus is in Simon's house, a Pharisee who had invited him to eat in his house. A woman comes in, kneels at Jesus' feet, weeps, bathes his feet with her tears, loosens her hair to wipe Jesus' feet, kisses them and anoints them with ointment. The act of loosening her hair in public was a sign of independence. This is the scene that causes the debate that follows.

Luke 7:39-40: The Pharisees' reply and Jesus' reply

Jesus does not retreat, does not reprove the woman but rather welcomes what she does.

The woman is someone who, according to the observant Jews of the time, could not be welcomed. Seeing what was going on, the Pharisee criticises Jesus and condemns the woman: "This man, were he a prophet, would surely know who and what manner of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner!" In reply to the Pharisee's provocation, Jesus tells a parable; a parable that will help the Pharisee and all of us to see the invisible call of the love of God who reveals himself in that scene.

Luke 7:41-43: The parable of the two debtors and the Pharisee's reply

The parable recounts the following: A creditor had two debtors. One owed him 500 denarii and the other 50. A denarius was equivalent to a day's wage. Thus the wages for fifty days! Neither of the two could pay. Both were forgiven. Which of them will love him more? The Pharisee replies: "He to whom he forgave more!" The parable presupposes that earlier, both the Pharisee and the woman had received some favour from Jesus. Now, in their attitude towards Jesus, they show their appreciation for the favour received. The Pharisee shows his love, his gratitude, by inviting Jesus to his house. The woman shows her love, her gratitude with her tears, with kisses and with the ointment. Which of these actions shows a greater love; eating or the kisses and ointment? Does the measure of one's love depend on the size of the present offered?

Luke 7:44-47: Jesus applies the parable and defends the woman

When he had received the correct answer from the Pharisee, Jesus applied it to the situation which arose with the coming in of the woman during the meal. He defends the sinful woman against the criticism of the practising Jew. What Jesus is saying to the Pharisees of all times is this: "He to whom little is forgiven, loves little!" The personal security that I, the Pharisee, create for myself because of my observance of the laws of God and of the Church, frequently prevents me from experiencing the gratuitous love of a forgiving God. What matters is not the observance of the law as such, but the love with which I observe the law. Using the symbols of

the love of the sinful woman, Jesus answers the Pharisee who considered himself just: «You see this woman? I came into your house, and you poured no water over my feet, but she has poured out her tears over my feet and wiped them away with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but she has been covering my feet with kisses ever since I came in. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. For this reason I tell you that her sins, many as they are, have been forgiven her, because she has shown such great love. It is someone who is forgiven little who shows little love». It is as if he said: "Simon, in spite of the banquet you offer me, you have little love!" Why? The prophet Jeremiah had once said that in the future, in the new covenant, "no longer will they need to teach their friends and kinsmen how to know the Lord. All, from least to greatest, shall know me, says the Lord, for I will forgive their evildoing and remember their sin no more". (Jer 31:34). It is awareness of being freely forgiven that makes one experience the love of God. When the Pharisee calls the woman a "sinner", he is considering himself to be a just man who observes and practices the law. He is like the Pharisee from the other parable who said: "O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of men, robbers, dishonest, adulterers, or even like this publican" (Lk 18:11). Simon must have thought: "O God, I thank you because I am not like this sinful woman!" But

the one who went home justified was not the Pharisee but the publican who had said: "Be merciful to me a sinner!" (Lk 18:14). From the beginning, Pharisees always consider themselves sinless, because in all things they observe the law of God, they go to Mass, pray, give alms and pay their taxes. They place their security in what they do for God, not in the love and the forgiveness of God towards them. That is why Simon, the Pharisee cannot experience the gratuitousness of God's love.

Luke 7:48-50: Love generates forgiveness and forgiveness generates love

Jesus says to the woman: "Your sins are forgiven you." Then the guests begin to think: "Who is this who even forgives sins?" But Jesus says to the woman: "Your faith has saved you. Go and sin no more!" Here we see Jesus' new attitude. He does not condemn but welcomes. It is faith that enables the woman to know herself and to accept herself and God. In her exchange with Jesus, a new force breaks forth in her that enables her to be reborn. An important question comes to our mind. Would the sinful woman in the city have done what she did had she not been absolutely certain that Jesus would welcome her? This means that for the poor people of Galilee in those days, Jesus was someone to be trusted absolutely! "We can trust him. He will welcome us!" Do the marginalized people of today have this same certainty towards us Christians?

Luke 8:1-3: The disciples of Jesus' community

Jesus went to the villages and towns of Galilee, proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom of God and the twelve were with him. The expression "following Jesus" shows the condition of a disciple who follows the Master seeking to imitate his example and sharing in his fate. It is surprising that besides the men there were also women who "followed Jesus". Luke places the men and women disciples on an equal level. He also says that the women served Jesus with their goods. Luke also mentions the names of some of these women disciples: Mary Magdalene, born in the city of Magdala. She had been delivered of seven demons. Joanna, the wife of Cuza, Herod Antipa's procurator, who was governor of Galilee. Susanna and many others.

c) Further information:

i) Luke's Gospel has always been considered the Gospel of women. Indeed, Luke is the one who most records occasions that show the relationship of Jesus with women. However, the novelty, the Good News concerning women, is not simply because of the many citations of their presence around Jesus, but in Jesus' attitude towards them. Jesus touches them, allows them to touch him, without fear of being contaminated (Lk 7:39; 8:44-45.54). The difference between Jesus and the masters of the time is that Jesus accepts women as followers and disciples (Lk 8:2-3; 10"39). The liberating force of God, which acts in Jesus, raises women to assume their place of dignity (Lk 13:13). Jesus feels the suffering of the widow and joins in her sorrow (Lk 7:13). The work of the woman who prepares food, is seen by Jesus as a sign of the Kingdom (Lk 13:20-21). The persevering widow who fights for her rights is presented as a model of prayer (Lk 18:1-8), and the poor widow who shares her meagre goods with others is presented as the model of gift and of dedication (Lk 21:1-4). At a time when the witness of women was not considered valid, Jesus chooses women as witnesses of his death (Lk 23:49), of his burial (Lk 23:55-56) and of his resurrection (Lk 24:1-11.22-24).

ii) The Gospels record different lists of the names of the twelve disciples who followed Jesus. The names are not always the same, but there are always twelve names, evoking the twelve tribes of the new people of God. There were women who also followed Jesus, from Galilee to Jerusalem. Mark's Gospel defines their attitude in three words, three verbs: following, serving, going up to Jerusalem (Mk 15:41). The Evangelists do not give a list of the women disciples who followed Jesus, but their names are known to this day through the pages of the Gospels, especially of Luke, and they are:: Mary Magdalene (Lk 8:3; 24:10); Joanna the wife of Chuza (Lk 8:3); Susanna (Lk 8:3); Salome (Mk 15:45); Mary, James' mother (Lk 24:10); Mary, Cleophas' wife (Jn 19:25); Mary, the mother of Jesus (Jn 19:25).

6. Prayer: A hymn to Love (1 Cor 13:1-13)

Above all, love!

1 Though I command languages both human and angelic -- if I speak without love, I am no more than a gong booming or a cymbal clashing.

2 And though I have the power of prophecy, to penetrate all mysteries and knowledge, and though I have all the faith necessary to move mountains -- if I am without love, I am nothing.

3 Though I should give away to the poor all that I possess, and even give up my body to be burned -- if I am without love, it will do me no good whatever.

4 Love is always patient and kind; love is never jealous; love is not boastful or conceited, 5 it is never rude and never seeks its own advantage, it does not take offence or store up grievances. 6 Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but finds its joy in the truth. 7 It is always ready to make allowances, to trust, to hope and to endure whatever comes. 8 Love never comes to an end. But if there are prophecies, they will be done away with; if tongues, they will fall silent; and if knowledge, it will be done away with. 9 For we know only imperfectly, and we prophesy imperfectly; 10 but once perfection comes, all imperfect things will be done away with.

11 When I was a child, I used to talk like a child, and see things as a child does, and think like a child; but now that I have become an adult, I have finished with all childish ways. 12 Now we see only reflections in a mirror, mere riddles, but then we shall be seeing face to face. Now I can know only imperfectly; but then I shall know just as fully as I am myself known.

13 As it is, these remain: faith, hope and love, the three of them; and the greatest of them is love.

7. Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, we thank for the word that has enabled us to understand better the will of the Father. May your Spirit enlighten our actions and grant us the strength to practice that which your Word has revealed to us. May we, like Mary, your mother, not only listen to but also practice the Word. You who live and reign with the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit forever and ever. Amen.