

**Sermon preached at Marlborough Road Methodist Church
at the Evening Service on Sunday 5th July 2015
by Michael King**

This morning I spoke about the imperative of mission for the church here at Marlborough Road. This evening I would like us to concentrate on the characteristics of any fellowship group in this church, groups that we might feel confident about introducing others into.

We need to be confident about going out into our communities to share God's love; and we need to feel confident about inviting others to join in church services, prayer groups, fellowship groups or even the choir. So I want to talk about Christian welcome.

The gospel reading for this evening's service is Luke 7:36-50, the story of the sinful woman washing, drying and anointing the feet of Jesus.

I want to say up-front that Christian welcome is essential, not an added extra. People still ask me what I miss most about not being involved in the World Church Relationships team at Methodist Church House. Very high on the list is the unexpected visitors, people from all over the world who simply dropped in to the building. Sometimes people standing in the queue for Madame Tussaud's across the road decided to drop in Methodist Church House and were shown upstairs to the office. Or it could be Methodists from all over the world, ex-missionaries or mission partners, overseas church leaders who just happened to be in London, etc. It was so important to have a comfortable area to welcome guests, some easy chairs, a coffee table, facilities to make drinks, something sweet to eat, or at least to offer. A time of sharing, a sense of welcome.

I am delighted to see that Marlborough Road church is developing the room at the entrance of the building into a more comfortable and inviting space, complete with easy chairs. I am sure that it will be a helpful and welcoming room in the coming days.

Returning to my previous role in the Church, I also miss travelling to other countries on Methodist business. Not so much time spent in airports or on long flights, but 'the other end' being met by people I did not know and within an hour I was often in the home of a 'stranger'. There I would be welcomed with food and drink, share in conversation and prayer, engage with other Christians at a deep level. What a deep privilege I found it, to be on the receiving end of such rich hospitality based on our common faith. This kind of welcome goes beyond the giving of garlands or beads or whale's teeth, as one might receive in the Pacific; it is a welcome that has at its heart the love of our Lord and Saviour.

At the heart of Christian welcome is the importance that is placed on whether or not the newcomer or outsider 'matters' to the host. Do you matter? Is your presence important to me? Is it possible that your presence might change me in some way? Here I would want to introduce the lovely Swahili word 'Ubuntu' which, roughly translated, means "I am because

we are". Ubuntu gets to the heart of how we change, and are changed by, others when we interact with them. Such willingness to be changed lies at the heart of real welcome.

So let's turn to Luke 7 and the story of Jesus being welcomed by both Simon the Pharisee and the sinful woman. To be fair, Simon did invite Jesus to dinner, and Jesus clearly reclines and eats with him. At this level, Jesus is welcomed. But is Jesus loved in his presence? The impression given is that Simon had his own (selfish?) reasons for inviting Jesus, and they probably had little to do with the expectation of learning from or being changed by Jesus. Contrast that welcome with the actions of the sinful woman. Whoever she was, and whatever she had done, she must have had some prior interaction with Jesus; enough to know that she was not beyond God's love and that, even in the situation she now found herself, she could find forgiveness. In response to such good news this woman, who is herself an outsider, now behaves as a host and welcomes Jesus into her life. She wets his feet with her tears (no holding back); she dries his feet with her hair (bold, even shameful, in most societies, but all that matters is the one who brings good news); and she sits behind the reclining Jesus and anoints his feet with expensive perfume (Jesus is her only focus). Now in anyone's language, that is a welcome!

The contrast is clear enough. Simon's formal, even minimalist welcome: the woman's lavish response to meeting love, forgiveness and grace. In offering this welcome, she has made herself vulnerable, she has risked the outrage of the respectable, she has been 'over the top' in offering love.

This 'extreme' welcome is very close to something often referred to as 'radical hospitality'. Some people trace this idea back to the 6th Century and St Benedict. His 'rule' or 'way' of love taught that in times of difficulty, instead of bolting doors and simply protecting those we love, we should welcome the stranger or embrace the stranger into our midst. It has echoes of Matthew 25:31-40, "When Lord did we see you (in any kind of need) and welcome you?" Radical hospitality is to look at others with the eyes of Jesus.

In these days of apparently wanton killing, a week after the Tunisian beach shootings, none of this is easy, if it ever was. And we have also been through a General Election a couple of months ago, with underlying themes of selfishness, expressed in the way we view the economy, or nationalism, or immigration. How do we offer welcome when we look at the unfolding events of the camps outside Calais or the boats crossing the Mediterranean?

So we return to what we can do to offer welcome, as Church, here in Banbury. Wouldn't it be good if this church were known as a 'welcoming church' in Banbury, not just to people like us, but to all people regardless of background and need. Better still, wouldn't it be wonderful if all the churches ecumenically here in Banbury were known collectively as 'welcoming' to the stranger. Isn't that something we should strive for?

So to conclude, let's think again about Luke 7:36-50. A woman, inspired by the grace and love of Jesus, is happy to make herself vulnerable and risks the outrage of the respectable. Were we to make such lavish hospitality a reality here at Marlborough Road in all our different fellowship or worshipping groups, and be accessible to all, just think what a difference it would make – not just to the church, but to our whole community.

In the name of the Father, son and Holy Spirit. Amen