
The sermon arises from the web of connections between today's readings and from research into them, including an article called *A Reader's Guide to Meals in New Testament Times* (extract in notes). The gospel is one of those powerful incidents where the writer gives us a tremendous physical feeling of the occasion. With this reading it is very important to enter into the situation and understand what was going on and what it felt like, not just for Simon or the woman or even Jesus, but for all of us who are there as we listen. So this is the story of someone who was at that meal:

THE SWEET SMELL OF SUCCESS

I made it! I finally made it! The thought was as satisfying as the as the savoury aroma of roasting lamb that drifted temptingly from the cooking place on the soft evening breeze. It was a thin thread, drawing me in. A culinary life-line to social acceptability. A fragile thread, so easily broken. One false step and all my work would be for nothing. Dinner at Simon's. At last.

As I approached the courtyard I could see the usual crowd of hangers on. Not good enough to be invited in but hovering on the fringes of Simon's hospitality. Hoping some of his respectability would rub off on them, I suppose. Hoping for a little whiff of power to perfume them too. Hoping, on its wings, to rise to the success that gets you invited to the right dinner parties with the right people. The kind of people whose rightness is just obvious to everyone – especially to them.

Yes, you had to be "right" to get inside the house, never mind to the dinner table. You are who you eat with and Simon was nothing if not – well, I was going to say "righteous", but I guess "rigorous" would be a better word. I'd worked hard, very hard, at my behaviour, my observances, to get myself this invitation tonight. A momentary thought crossed my mind that it might be easier to approach God himself than one of those who are so sure that they are his earthly representatives. But there was no chance of me approaching God – it was for his earthly success that I wanted Simon's company. For the kudos that it would bring me and the social networking that came with the meal. Yes, I'd worked hard to get my seat at this table but it was going to be worth it. I was an insider now.

Inside the house, it was obvious just how much correct behaviour and proper observances was going to play in all this. He made a great fuss about "returning to my origins and the tradition of my ancestors". It sounded like a compliment but really it was a warning. You could see that he was uneasy. He might need my connections as I needed his, but he didn't have to like it. He might talk lightly about my great experiences, about the many roads I'd traded across the length and breadth of the empire, but he wasn't going to bother about washing off the dust I'd picked up in my travels. No, he was more bothered about the taint that I'd acquire: the faint smell of the Romans that troubled his nostrils. It was as much as he could do not to rush off and have a good wash once he'd greeted me. Not that he actually touched me, you understand. The kiss of greeting was as ritual and symbolic as you could get. Anyone would think I was about to betray him.

Yes, Simon needed me, but he didn't have to like me. I was only there on sufferance. There because I could be useful. He needed me as I needed him. I wondered what

for. He was a man who had built his authority on rigorous respectability – he never put a foot out of line, whereas my feet had taken me everywhere. And now I, who had dined with powerbrokers of half the Roman world, found myself minding my manners. I was not here because I belonged. I was here because I had something he wanted, an influence beyond the world of our mutual race, that could achieve something for him. The scent of success clung to me and Simon, however much he disliked it, needed it for whatever deep and complex scheme he had in mind.

Deep and complex certainly describe the talk at dinner. He'd invited some wandering rabbi, a teacher, who was flavour, or perhaps in my trade I should say perfume, of the month. The talk was all about the Law, as usual. Not that I took any part. No thanks! There was no way I was going to risk getting one of those tiny technicalities wrong and showing myself up. No, I kept quiet and tried to enjoy the food, although frankly I didn't think that Simon had served us his best. Above my head, the theological swords thrust and parried in a bloodless contest. Simon didn't seem to be getting the best of it, which wouldn't please him.

Then circumstances played right into his hands. A gaggle of woman had been hovering on the fringe of the onlookers – some followers of this teacher, I gathered. One of them had come closer. A glorious perfume drifted from the folds of her robes. I grinned to myself with glee. Simon was not going to like this! This was not a wanderer from Galilee. This was a woman from our own community. We all knew her although everyone pretended not to. There she stood, tall, graceful, beautifully dressed, with long, flowing hair ... beautiful. A woman anyone would be proud to have in their house, if only those rich robes and sparkling jewels had not been the wages of her shame.

But they were all so involved in the conversation that no-one noticed her. No-one except me. I admired her boldness – but then, in her own way, she was as successful as Simon or me. But success had no sweet perfume for her. She knelt down quietly and I saw that silent tears were pouring down her face. Tears of a deep and terrible grief that it hurt even to look at. Her eyes had the empty pain of someone from whom everything – all love of husband, child, family – had been torn. And her tears fell down upon the feet of the teacher and as she bent her head in grief, her hair swept down and she wiped them away, so gently and swiftly as if she could not bear for him to feel them.

Then, just as quietly, she picked up the box she had put on the floor. A beautiful box. As beautiful as the woman who had bought it from me, full of exquisite perfume, for an exorbitant price, not an hour before. She must have been on her way home. Why had she come here? Why was she drawn to Simon's house? What could he possibly mean to her, this wandering teacher?

To my horror, she opened the box and poured the entire contents over the teacher's feet. The smell of the released perfume was over-whelming. Conversation stopped in its tracks. Well, I thought, here's where Simon finally gets the better of the rabbi. Then the teacher spoke:

“Simon, I have something to say to you.”

It was like a stone dropped into still water. Suddenly this ordinary man was the centre of extraordinary power. I can't explain it. But something radiated from him as the perfume radiated from the box. Like the perfume, it filled the room with sweetness, but more potent, more pure, more piercing than any perfume you could buy from me or anyone. And the woman's face changed. Her empty eyes were filled to the brim with life-giving light as the man looked at her as no man had ever looked before - and saw her as she truly was.

I forget what was said, to Simon or to her. For I was seeing for the first time the emptiness, the hollow void, the inward life that was nothing – dead, corrupted, rotting in my heart and in Simon's. For Simon, I cannot speak. But for myself I knew that all perfume I had ever sold could not give me the anointing of grace that this woman had received. I could not cover up my own pain and shame. Like her, I was an outsider. An outsider who had been prepared to live a lie in order to get inside for my own gain.

And just when I was overwhelmed by despair and grief, his words washed over me, from the still centre of his presence. "The sins, which are many, have been forgiven."

Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, bringing good news. With him were the women, and twelve men – no, not just twelve, for there was one more, who followed with the love of one for whom indeed much had been forgiven.



NOTES:

Greedy rich man uses other people's provisions (Nathan's story)

Women not wanted (list at end)

Of course I'm only here because I'm useful to him (and he to me) otherwise he wouldn't bother with a foreigner – only wants my influence with fellow Roman officials – surprised he didn't ritually wash his hands before dining with me - maybe he doesn't honour this teacher that much if I'm invited

Bathsheba - success

>>> I am the same as the woman – unwanted, unclean, unaccepted

SAMUEL:

- it is because the rich man has power and authority that he can act in such a manner
- same Hebrew word is used in both instances when David 'takes/grasps' Bathsheba (11:4) and the rich man 'takes/grasps' the poor man's ewe (12:4)."
- Simon is a grabber?

GALATIANS

- arises from insistence that you've got to join our club

- God offers a relationship of ongoing love to all without discrimination and that neither entry into this relationship nor continuing in it is dependent on qualifications based on race, gender, or levels of adherence even to biblical law
- it is inspired by a spirituality which places greater emphasis on issues of authority and correctness than on what achieves loving and right relationships. The issue is an ongoing one in the church's life today.
- justified – put into right relationship with God

LUKE

- “ointment” was much more costly than “oil”.
- “The kingdom of God” ([8:1](#)) is both proclaimed in word and carried in their hearts.
- Jesus gives instructions for table etiquette and fellowship which fly in the face of custom.

From A Reader's Guide to Meals in New Testament Times:

Food, articulated in terms of who eats what with whom under which circumstances, had long been one of the most important languages in which Jews conceived and conducted social relations among human beings and between human beings and God. Food was a way of talking about the law and lawlessness (1981:72).

She then states her hypotheses about the symbolic nature of food and eating in the Hebrew scriptures:

1. The power of the Lord is manifested in his ability to control food: to feed is to bless, to confer life; to feed bad food or to starve is to judge or punish, to confer death.
2. Acceptance of the power and authority of the Lord is symbolized by acceptance of his food.
3. Rejection of the power and authority of the Lord is symbolized by seeking after food he has forbidden.
4. People "limit" or "tempt" the Lord--that is, question the extent of his power or authority--by questioning his ability to feed them.
5. The Lord's word is equated with food.
6. Eating joins people with the Lord or separates them (1981:72).