

In Mary's hymn of praise, *The Magnificat*, we hear:

“(God) casts the mighty from their thrones
and raises the lowly.”

This could be a motto or sub-title for Luke's Gospel.

We are in the year of Luke; year C of the three year cycle of Sunday readings; and we will listen to passages from Luke's Gospel, almost without interruption, until Advent begins at the end of November. Time and again we will hear Mary's acclamation illustrated in the ministry of her son according to Luke. The lowly are lifted up and the mighty are cast down.

Among the lowly are all women. In this utterly patriarchal society women were non-persons, of no account, of little worth. Their place was on the inside, in the house, invisible. Their mode was silence. Their status was that of a possession of their husband or eldest male relative. Everyday the rabbis would pray in thanksgiving that they had not been created female. The birth of a daughter was considered a loss.

Jesus' attitude to women was astonishing; to most in his day, scandalous. The way Jesus treated women - as disciples, as hearers of the Word, as significant people, ran against the accepted norms of his culture. At the end of today's gospel we hear of women who accompanied him on his journey. These women include Mary Magdalene from whom seven demons were driven out - which means she was in a very bad way indeed, though the nature of her affliction is unknown; and the wife of Herod's steward - which means Jesus had touched the highest echelons of Galilean society. But where, it must be asked, where are their husbands who should be protecting their wife's honour, and who should be being looked after and their households cared for by their wives? Why are these women not performing the duties expected of them towards those they should be serving? All these women have reason to be grateful to Jesus who has cured them of affliction by demons or disease. They show their gratitude in a most practical way, provided for Jesus and the apostles from their own resources. They are disciples who give a lead that the early Church will follow - the community will share its goods so that no-one goes without what they need to live. Nevertheless, it is difficult to exaggerate the scandal that this arrangement must have caused and the gossip it must have generated.

This is the price to be paid for going against what society considers acceptable, and challenging cultural norms.

Another woman, not Mary Magdalene, is a central character in the main story of today's Gospel. As a woman, and a woman who has a bad name in the town, she is certainly among 'the lowly'.

Jesus has been invited to a formal dinner at the house of a prominent dignitary of the town. It was not unusual for a visiting rabbi to be so honoured, even though the host, a Pharisee - one of the 'the separated ones'- would be most particular about the people with whom he would eat. Such an occasion was a public event. Only the invited would dine, reclining on couches, feet away from the food in the customary manner, but the doors of the house would be open wide for the villagers to come and gape at the hospitality that Simon the Pharisee was able to offer so generously to his guests. In this way, Simon would expect to grow in stature in the eyes of the villagers. His honour, so important in this culture, would be enhanced.

His contemptuous treatment for the visiting rabbi was thereby clear for all to see. It was the custom for all the males of the household to line up and greet the rabbi at his arrival by kissing his hands. Not even the host has performed this significant ritual. It was customary to welcome any guest by having their feet washed and anointing their head with oil. This was as much a matter of course and courtesy as it is for us to welcome someone into our home with a handshake or kiss and say, "Sit yourself down and have a cup of tea". The insult must be intended. It is a challenge demanding a response. The audience, invited guests and *hoi polloi* would be on edge waiting for Jesus' reaction. For this a society where such a challenge cannot be ignored without serious loss of face, and therefore loss of honour and respect, in the eyes of the people.

Then appears the woman-with-a name, though she remains un-named. She has seen the insult and seeks to redress the slight done to Jesus. We will later learn that she has already encountered Jesus. Perhaps she has heard him preach; certainly she has been moved by him and has felt the power of forgiveness lift her to heights she had considered forever beyond her. Now she gives Jesus the signs of hospitality and welcome his host has denied him. She washes his feet with her tears and dries them with her hair. A woman never let down her hair in public. Her hair was for her husband's enjoyment only. This action alone was grounds for divorce. She has ointment with her, possibly an indication of her former profession. With it, she anoints Jesus.

If Simon the Pharisee was ambivalent towards his guest before this woman appeared, he is now convinced that his dinner-companion is a fraud. No prophet would allow himself to be touched by such a one.

"Do you see this woman?" Jesus asks. This is the key phrase in this story. What Simon sees when he looks in the direction of this woman is someone who is irredeemable. He sees a bad reputation. He sees sin and scandal. And his mind is closed. He is not easily going to see anything else. Jesus has to try and make Simon open his mind and see the woman differently. It is one thing to be forgiven by God. But the woman has to live in this village and she needs to be accepted by Simon and the rest of the village as a changed woman. Jesus has to get Simon to alter his perspective and see the woman differently - to see her as Jesus sees her. In other

words to see her as a person; an individual; a child of God, despite her gender, who is open to God's transforming grace, and who has been touched by that grace and is now repentant and full of love.

What do you see? It is so difficult not to fall into the habit of judging by stereotypes or by reputation. He is a Muslim; she is a flirt; they are Jews; we all know what the French are like; and you know what they say about her. We need to see as Jesus sees - seeing each person as a person, a unique individual, a child of God. And, seeing as Jesus sees, we might then begin to lift up the lowly.