

**Sermon preached by The Revd John Stewart
at St George's Anglican Church Malvern**

**Pentecost 4c
15 June 2013**

**Readings for the Day:
1 Kings 21.1-10, 15-21a
Galatians 2.15-21
Luke 7.36-8.3**

Last weekend Melbourne hosted the annual Body, Mind, Spirit Festival. I won't put you on the spot by asking you to put your hand up if you went. It's an exhibition really of several hundred people interested in physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing. You can have your tarot cards read, your horoscope, you can find out about different kinds of meditation, and healing practices. There are people into reading auras, iridology, chakras, crystals, massage, herbs, holographs, kinesiology and so much more.

I went to it a few years ago with some of the folks who were attending a program I was running at the time – seeing as how we're into things of the body, mind and spirit. I have two lasting impressions. One is of the many hundreds of people there – all searching, wondering, exploring important questions. Looking for meaning, direction, or some connection with the sacred, the beyond, the mystery of life. Much of what was on offer seemed to me to be very superficial or trite and hardly capable of touching the needs I sensed in the people I spoke with. There was certainly a wide range of options and choices.

My other lasting memory is that there was no one representing Christianity or Jesus. I'm not sure we should be there, but I am sure that we offer a very credible option for those people.

For us Jesus is the one who helps us make sense of our experiences, who gives meaning, who opens us to our skills and abilities, whose spirit fires us into the activities of each day. He is the one who shows us the love God displays to us and the loving response we make back to God. He is the one we can fall in love with, we can trust, we can continue to grow into. His way is the way we have chosen – out of all the options there are around us.

Parents bringing children for baptism today make explicit their choice. One of the questions they answer publicly is *Do you turn to Christ?* And they reply I turn to Christ. I am choosing to join up with Jesus friends and I bring my new child to join us in this adventure of faith. When Jesus was baptized he heard the voice of God say to him – you are my beloved Son, I take delight in you. And that's how God views each of us. God takes delight in us. God's love is freely poured into our hearts. So this loving God is one we can give our hearts to, is one we can give our lives to and as we do we become the best person we can be – the person God has in mind for us to become.

In today's Gospel story we see two people contrasted. On the one hand there is the woman who was outcaste by society because of her sinfulness. When she hears a word of forgiveness, acceptance and love she responds in the most extravagant and outrageous way. She lets her hair down and shows Jesus just how much she loves him in return for his love of her. On the other hand there are the blokes including Simon the host of the dinner – outraged by her behavior. She has crossed every boundary, broken every taboo and we are scandalized. Jesus tells a parable which traps Simon in its inescapable logic. Love is the response to grace, to unmerited favour.

Jesus praises the despised woman in male company and criticizes Simon for his begrudging hospitality. He acts in ways totally unheard of in that culture. The woman has been forgiven many sins and has shown how much she loves. Whereas Simon, you have many sins as well, but little awareness of them and you have certainly not repented. You have been forgiven little and therefore love little. This rebuke to Simon is stunning. The great unrepentant sinner is Simon, not the woman. The drama began with Jesus under scrutiny and the tables are turned and Simon is exposed.

The message of Jesus is a challenge to us today, and it is explored by Paul in today's second reading. Paul wants the Christians of Galatia to understand the centrality of God's love for us. How we live is our gratitude to God for that love not in order that we might earn it or deserve it. Jesus is touching the issues of the heart and teaching the way of transformation, to help people stay alive, in love and in touch. There is room for outsiders, diversity, intimacy and scandalizing of the comfortable at the Lord's Table.

This is contrasted by the drama of the first reading. King Ahab is accused of acting dreadfully and through the prophet Elijah God declares his punishment will be severe. Paul and the Gospel story tell us that in Christ all that is overturned by forgiveness and reconciliation.

The woman's behavior is a great challenge to us today. What are we doing to show our love for Jesus, to express our gratitude for God's taking delight in us? How extravagant are we in falling in love with Jesus? But we are Anglicans and we don't act extravagantly or outrageously. We do things decently and in order, don't we? Yet, did you notice that today's Collect has us pray *Christ Jesus, whose glory was poured out like perfume, and who chose for our sake to take the form of a slave: may we also pour out our love with holy extravagance, that our lives may be fragrant with you.*

I invite you to think about how you might live this way in the days ahead. It might mean just offering an act of kindness, of speaking a gentle word about your friendship with Jesus. It might mean letting go of that grudge you have been holding or that pain. It might mean finally living in the knowledge that God does, indeed, take delight in you. Whatever you do, it will make a difference.