

Holy Week Reflections - Wednesday

Luke 7: 44-47 “Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.”

Reflection

Not many people have heard of Kassiani. She was a Byzantine abbess, composer and poet in the 9th Century AD. Why do I mention her today? Because the reading – the story of a sinner entering the house of a pharisee to anoint Jesus’ feet with tears and perfume resonates with our reading from Luke. Today, an equivalent reaction is like a Covid-19 sufferer walking into a High Court judge’s house and pouring obscenely expensive perfume on cheesy feet!

Kassiani is also known as *‘the woman who has fallen into many sins’*. She also reminds me that, like Jesus’ words to Simon, opportunities to understand God’s love more fully come when least expected.

Rather than hearing of Kassiani from church, I heard about her from punk singer/songwriter Frank Turner and his album about inspirational women through history. Kassiani made an impact on a movement known for demonstrative subversion.

This is exactly what Jesus points out is going on in our reading. We don’t know the nature of the sin – sin being the shorthand for any action that separates us from God and our neighbour – but her repentance is just as extravagant as any of it. It isn’t the sin that is condemned, but the arrogance of those watching that Jesus condemns. Do not reject people just because they don’t act like you would wish is Jesus’ point. Your own shortcomings – like Simon’s lack of hospitality - will be held up before you. It won’t leave you a leg to stand on.

Accordingly, we are to accept any repentance – a heavy word for a turning around and seeking to make amends – in whatever way it comes and feel joy at being set free from any burdens you carry.

The hymn of Kassiani is renowned as one of the most haunting and demanding pieces of music in the Orthodox church. It is usually performed on Wednesday in Holy Week and can last from 10-20 minutes. Like Jesus, it is a piece that seems to unite different sections of society – including those who might be made to feel unwelcome most of the time. In Greece, sex workers often come in large numbers to listen to this particular piece of music.

Equally, Kassiani – like Jesus- was not afraid of standing up for what was right. When lashed for defending her faith at a time of persecution she retorted ‘I hate silence, when it is time to speak’.

Jesus knew that no-one was beyond forgiveness and living a life in all its fullness. His words are as much ours as much as they are the woman with the perfume: ‘Your faith has saved you; go in peace’. It is an expression of unconditional forgiveness that leaves our response up to us.

Action

Perfume and love can get everywhere. Take some perfume, or deodorant, and scent some unexpected places of your house; so that you notice a scent in an unfamiliar place. The more the merrier, and the more noticeable the scent!

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference. Amen.