6 GOOD NEWS FOR THE NEEDY

Doctor to the sick (Mt 9:12; Mk 2:17; Lk 5:31–32)

Human revolutions are usually good news for some people and bad news for others. Jesus' announcement of the coming of God's revolution also cut two ways. But it was first and foremost good news. We saw this in chapter 3, for example in the saying about the children in the marketplace, which contrasted John the Baptist's sombre ministry with its focus on judgement and Jesus' ministry with its focus on God's mercy. That saying was a comment on the accusation that Jesus was 'a friend of tax-collectors and sinners'.

The accusation was not unjustified, since it was indeed one of the striking characteristics of Jesus' ministry that he not only proclaimed the love of God for sinners but also expressed it in practice. The sight of Jesus, a religious leader, sitting down to table with corrupt tax-collectors, immoral prostitutes and other known bad characters set his critics buzzing with disapproval. Eating with people meant a lot in the first-century Jewish world; it meant acceptance and recognition. In the context of Jesus' announcement that the kingdom of God had come, his eating with conspicuous sinners suggested that the kingdom was open to such people. How could that be?

The answer is that God's revolution, proclaimed and brought by Jesus, was a revolution bringing deliverance. That idea of the kingdom was, of course, well understood by Jesus' contemporaries, but whereas they thought in terms of national deliverance from foreign oppression and of personal deliverance for the righteous, Jesus had a bigger concept; God's revolution meant deliverance for the needy, the

oppressed and the depressed, for the sick, the demon-possessed and the sinners. Jesus' opponents expected sinners to be judged in the coming kingdom, and, although they subscribed in theory to the desirability of getting sinners to repent, in practice they tended to keep away from evildoers and they expected God to endorse their condemnation of the unclean and ungodly. When Jesus mixed with such people and announced the coming of God's kingdom to them, this contradicted what his opponents stood for and was very uncomfortable to them. Jesus seemed to be undermining their high standards, and they protested vocally.

A good number of Jesus' parables are in response to such protests. We have to look to Matthew and especially to Luke for these parables. But Mark too has Jesus' pithy saying: 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners' (Mk 2:17). In this mini-parable Jesus justifies his distinctive ministry to the obvious sinners of society very forcefully. He does not mean to imply that his religious opponents are actually righteous in the sight of God, but only to explain how ministry to the irreligious has a very clear rationale, even on their premises. He was not in the business of lowering the standards of the kingdom of God, or of identifying with people for the sake of it, but of healing people for the kingdom.

This understanding of the kingdom may have seemed strange to his contemporaries, but it was the fulfilment of the Old Testament vision of God's revolution (as he made clear). We might compare Jesus' work to the modern eye-camp in countries like India, where a team of doctors descend on a village or town for a week or more and invite all who need help to come for free care and treatment: crowds of needy people are helped. Jesus' revolution was such a healing campaign.

The point was demonstrated, of course by Jesus' own healing of the physically sick. But his mission was one that involved physical, social and spiritual healing, because that is the nature of the kingdom of God.

The two debtors (Lk 7:41–50)

Luke has a particular interest in Jesus' ministry to the disadvantaged. It comes out at the beginning of his gospel in his description of Jesus' infancy, for example in Mary's song, the 'Magnificat', in which she speaks of God scattering the proud, lifting up the humble, filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty (Lk 1:46–55). It comes out in his description of Jesus' programmatic sermon at Nazareth, with its text from Isaiah 61: 'The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor ... to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed ...' (Lk 4:18–19). It comes out in his version of the Beatitudes: 'Blessed are you who are poor ... Woe to you who are rich' (Lk 6:20, 24). It comes out in his description of Jesus' ministry to outcasts like Zacchaeus, with its striking concluding sentence, 'For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost' (Lk 19:10).

It comes out too in his parables. Thus in Luke 7, Luke describes Jesus having dinner in a Pharisee's house. (It is notable that, for all the hard things he has to say about the rich and the religious, Jesus does not stay away from them or refrain from fellowship with them.) While dinner is going on, a woman who is a known sinner, presumably a village prostitute, comes to the house and goes over to where Jesus is reclining for the meal.

We may guess that it was a big meal, with a lot of coming and going of servants and with others from the village looking on. At formal meals the custom was to recline on couches to eat: guests would lean on their left elbows with their legs tucked behind them and eat with their right hands from dishes placed in front of them, probably on low tables. Luke describes the woman coming behind where Jesus was reclining, weeping profusely over Jesus' feet and wiping them with her hair, then kissing his feet and pouring expensive perfume over them. It is an extraordinary scene, and not surprisingly it caused embarrassment and comment.

The comment of the host at the feast was that this disproved Jesus' claim to be from God. Perhaps he had

invited Jesus to his house out of critical curiosity to see what the controversial teacher was really like, and hoping to catch him out. Certainly he did not go out of his way to make Jesus welcome, as becomes clear later in the story. He comments that, had Jesus been a real prophet, he would have recognised the woman as a sinner and he would have had nothing to do with her: the Pharisees prided themselves on keeping themselves separate from anything impure; in the eyes of his host Jesus was allowing himself to be defiled by physical contact with this particularly unclean woman.

In this context Jesus tells his parable of the two debtors who were unable to pay their debts and who were both let off free by a remarkably generous money-lender; the one was excused a debt of five hundred denarii – well over a year's wages – and the other fifty denarii. Jesus ends this parable, like others such as the good Samaritan, with a question that gets the person to whom it is directed to bring out the point of the story: 'Which of them will love him more?' The answer is obvious.

Jesus then goes on to apply the point to the cases of his host and the sinful woman: he compares her emotional and extravagant welcome with the cool reception he received from his host. His host's hospitality did not even extend to courtesies such as providing water for Jesus to wash his feet. People entering a house would leave their shoes at the entrance, and it was a special courtesy for someone, most likely a slave, to wash the dust from guests' feet. The Pharisee did not do that. Nor did he greet Jesus with a kiss, though it would be normal to kiss a friend on the cheek, or a teacher on his hand. Nor did he anoint Jesus' head with olive oil, the commonest and cheapest oil. In fact he did not go out of his way to do anything.

It is possible that he was being deliberately insulting, and that the woman and others present noted the insult. If she did, then she may have wished to make up for what Simon the host had failed to do. But it is probable that her actions were more spontaneous expressions of love. She had presumably came to this unlikely place – a Pharisee's house – because she knew of Jesus or perhaps had heard him. Joachim Jeremias thinks that Jesus may have been asked by

his Pharisee host to preach a sermon before the meal, and that the woman heard that. In any case, we may guess that she had been touched by his message of God's love for sinners such as herself – note Jesus' comment on 'her faith' in verse 50 – and she came to express her gratitude. She brought with her a stone flask of perfume: some women apparently wore such a flask around the neck to enhance their attractiveness; the prostitute now has another use for her flask. Perhaps she wanted to anoint Jesus' head with it. But when she comes up behind him, she breaks down, and her tears fall on Jesus' feet. She has no towel to dry them, and so she takes off her head-covering and lets her hair fall down, using that to dry Jesus' feet. For a woman to undo her hair in public was a disgrace – grounds for divorce according to some rabbis! But she is oblivious to convention: she pours kisses on Jesus' feet and uses her perfume – something much more costly than the olive oil that Simon did not use – to anoint Jesus' feet. The feet were for obvious reasons the dirtiest part of the body, and to minister to someone's feet was the lowliest of tasks. She expresses her humility and love in a dramatic and moving way.

The Pharisee completely fails to see the extraordinary significance of the action by the woman, and what had happened to her. He continues simply to see her as the local prostitute, and accuses Jesus of spiritual blindness in letting himself be touched by such a woman. Jesus does not let this go, and, even though it was not the done thing for a guest to question his host's hospitality, he explains that the difference between Simon's minimal welcome and her generous welcome is the difference between the two forgiven debtors: the one forgiven much is the one who will love much. The remarkable implication is that the woman has been forgiven by or through Jesus. And, to the astonishment of the other guests, Jesus says exactly that: 'Your sins are forgiven.' Jesus, it turns out, is not condoning sin by his actions, but expressing the forgiveness of God. And he brings that forgiveness not to the upright Pharisee, but to a woman and a prostitute. A revolution indeed.

In one respect the Pharisee was correct: he saw sin as

something serious, not lightly forgiven (contrast much modern thinking). Jesus interestingly pictures sin as 'debt' both in the parable, but also in the Lord's Prayer: 'Forgive us our debts, as we forgive those indebted to us' (Mt 6:12, literally translated). Our English translations follow Luke's lead in preferring words such as 'trespass' or 'sin' rather than debt (*cf.* Lk 11:4). But the concept of 'indebtedness' has value in making it clear that 'sin' is not something vaguely unpleasant, but is something that comes between people and, with potentially fatal consequences, between us and God.

Jesus brought the good news of God's forgiveness of those unable to pay their 'debts'. The revolution of God is a revolution of forgiveness. Those in the revolution are those who have received that forgiveness through Jesus, and whose lives are (or should be) marked by grateful love for Jesus, such as the woman showed, and by a forgiving spirit towards others, such as is described in the Lord's Prayer. (We shall return to this point when looking at the parable of the unmerciful servant in chapter 8.)

The lost sheep and the good shepherd (Lk 15:1–7; Mt 18:12–14; Jn 10:1–18)

The classic chapter for Jesus' good news for sinners is Luke 15, where we find the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son (usually known as the parable of the prodigal son). The chapter is introduced with the now-familiar protest of his opponents about his fraternising with the sinners of society.

By way of reply Jesus first compares the situation of the man who loses a sheep from his flock and then goes out to find it. Sheep and shepherds were very much a part of everyday life in rural Palestine. Some people looked down on shepherds, but the profession had an honourable history. King David was shepherd of the family flock, and God is often spoken of as shepherd of his people in the Old Testament, for example in that best-known of psalms, Psalm 23. Other notable passages speaking of shepherds and sheep