

# THE EMMAUS SERIES

## *11<sup>th</sup> Sunday Year C*

2 Samuel 12: 7-10, 134

Galatians 2:16, 19-21

Luke 7:36 – 8:3

## Who is this man, that even forgives sins?

The gospel writers reveal something of their own personalities and outlook in the way they present stories of the life of Jesus from the first generation of Christians. This is especially true of Luke, a cultured gentile convert with a sensitive and engaging disposition. He gives women a special place in the story. He alone – in a passage some verses before today's reading – tells the story of the widow burying her son, and he ends today's reading describing the group moving around with Jesus, the itinerant teacher, as including with the Twelve he has chosen, a group of well-to-do women who gave him material support. This group, which would have astounded Jesus' contemporaries, was a symbol of the New Israel, and its foreshadowing of the Kingdom he announced. And it is a woman who is at the centre of today's gospel story.

We would be wrong to presume that Simon, the host in today's incident had deliberately insulted Jesus as he received him into his house. He was curious to see and hear this man; but, as a Pharisee, he wished to make it clear that his invitation did not imply common cause with Jesus; so he welcomed him as an inferior rather than as an honoured guest.

In the customs of Jewish society, very different from those we take for granted, gatherings such as that to which Jesus was invited were more or less 'open house' to passers-by. The woman who came in and approached Jesus, we must presume, had been led by his teaching – and no doubt by his notorious concern for the outcasts of respectable society – to repent of her past life, and she came in to express her gratitude. Those at the meal would be reclining on mats, with their feet drawn up behind them, around a low table. Luke tells us, therefore, that she was 'behind him' as she made her remarkable gesture of devotion and gratitude to the Saviour. Luke, the cultured Greek, tells the story in the 'symposium' form fashionable in his culture – a form in which a banquet sets the scene for a remarkable conversation. Jesus begins by reading the thoughts of his host – who, as a Pharisee, is shocked to see Jesus allow himself to be touched by this woman of the streets, and concludes that he cannot possibly be a 'prophet' (rabbinical teaching directed that one must distance oneself at least two yards from a prostitute!).

Jesus' explanation, that it was only right that one who has found God's forgiveness through his ministry should be filled with a grateful love, is an invitation to us all to join him in the midst of the sinners and outcasts he has welcomed into his company. With the words that only the Lord can pronounce, he tells the woman, 'Your sins are forgiven'. [Two clarifications: 1) The widely accepted mistranslation, 'Her sins are forgiven because she has shown great love' confuses the straightforward message of the story.; 2) There are no grounds for identifying the woman with Mary of Magdala – the words, 'from whom seven demons had gone out' refer to her being healed of serious ailments by Jesus.]

John Thornhill sm