

Sunday 21 March: Fifth Sunday of Lent

Given

Readings: Isaiah 43.16-21; John 12.1-8

Isaiah 43:16-21

16Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, 17who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: 18Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. 19I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. 20The wild animals will honour me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, 21the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

John 12:1-12

12Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 2There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. 3Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. 4But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 5“Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” 6(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) 7Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. 8You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

12The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem.

Introduction

Have you ever been overwhelmed by a gift? I wonder what it was? I wonder what it cost the giver? I wonder what it led to? I remember my friend Ali's 40th birthday. The big church Hall was full of friends and family, festooned – as it had been for so many other celebrations. Her dazzling smile imparted her capacity to be in the moment and draw others into it. She was also at times present to the poignancy – her voice cracked at one point as she spoke. She was going to die from cancer soon and she and all the room knew it. This was a woman of faith and she smiled and radiated her Yes in the grip of the No, trusting that the Yes was ultimately going to win out. Choosing life and choosing to be given to it.

In our Lenten series so far we've considered being Taken Blessed Broken and now we come to being Given. As I've been meditating on the passion narratives, even in Gethsemane – and perhaps especially – Jesus is *given*, bringing all his doubts and fears to the Father. They too are given. Nothing is held back. And from that moment there is a real entering in to his Passion. Everything is arranged and appointed, like the structure of a well-prepared liturgy - the man with the water jar, the donkey, the Upper Room (the details vary with the gospels but that sense is there throughout). He is wholly given to the way the Father is asking him to follow. All our well-prepared liturgies can do this Holy Week and Easter is to provide a place where we can allow ourselves to be given over to participating with Jesus in his self-giving. A place where we can bring all the struggles we have to find a place of such freedom.

It's easy to see this as Jesus giving himself to *death*, but as we look closely, we see that in his givenness Jesus is most fully *alive* – most fully present to each moment of intense living. He is able to be totally in the moment, even at a time of almost crushing pressure.

Nowhere do we see this more clearly than at this meal with friends in Bethany. A moment of domestic intimacy with friends, almost out of time – and yet on the sixth day before the Passover – at the beginning of this week which will form the shape of the new creation – the new thing which God is doing - which parallels the six days of creation. It is framed, or rather clamped, between the intense pressure of the calls for his death after the raising of Lazarus and the calls for Lazarus' death afterwards.

Eucharist

What difference does it make to the atmosphere of the meal when it could so easily have been a memorial meal for one of the guests. But even that is a side issue as attention and pride of place is given to the one who will soon need to be remembered. These questions reverberate round the room. There he is, Lazarus, the man raised from the dead, in their midst, being ordinary. And there is Jesus, bringing with him threats on his life and his strange utterances about death. It may not be named but there's a feeling, however inarticulate, that the special guest with them for the last time – a last supper. It raises for us how we think about the eucharist: as a memorial meal, anticipating resurrection, celebrating the presence of the one who is alive with us? This story, this meal, poses this question of how we respond to Jesus' givenness with our own.

Smelling the fragrance of the story

We have to use our senses to smell the fragrance of this story. It goes beyond words into actions and senses. It has begun with the stench of Lazarus when he has been dead for four days in the chapter before. Do his family and friends note and marvel at his own familiar personal scent as they kiss him in greeting? Now we're in the presence of the aroma of roasting food, perhaps lamb and roast vegetables. Then there's the breaking open of this pound of nard – perfume worth a year's wages – with the refreshing, almost exhilaration scent that permeates the room as it is poured out. And finally the anticipation of the myrrh and the spices at Jesus' tomb – which will of course be used to anoint his dead body before burial.

These present smells will call forth others in our imaginations on the road through the Passion. What does hate smell like? – that hate expressed by the ones who want to kill Jesus. Or fear? Or faith? Or love? – how might we imagine the nard of Mary's faith to smell. What's the odour of betrayal, the smell of grief, the scent of resurrection? The perfume of life? What is the scent which will become the trademark perfume of discipleship? – the scent of givenness. Will we learn to recognise their different notes for what they are?

An act of witness

Mary's act of anointing Jesus for burial in his living presence is an act of witness. Who can tell how conscious an act it was? It doesn't really matter. Is she going to wash his feet as the usual act of hospitality and then feels moved to anoint them with oil because she wants to honour him? The only time people anointed *feet* with oil usually was in preparation for burial. And at the same time she foreshadows his act of footwashing, which he will command his disciples to follow. This is a prophetic act which recognises the self-giving of Jesus the paschal lamb. And it is an act of uninhibited wild love. A lover's gift: with all its freedom and physical intimacy as she wipes his feet with her loosened hair. Why wait with the perfume till he can't smell it, feel it trickling over him, feel her soft hair on his skin. Anyone who loves understands this urgency: Why defer the giving of ourselves and our love to a

future moment when we can do it now? If not now then when? Rather than give what she has *in memoriam*, she gives it in witness to the living, breathing, presence of Christ. That's the givenness of faith. The insistence of love. And yet in so doing she is picking up on his sadness and allowing him to name to all his movement towards his death and his parting from them.

Purity of heart is to will one thing

Barbara Brown Taylor says this, "But, like the bottle of perfume, his precious life was also not meant to be saved. It was going to be opened, offered, and used at great price. It will be raised up and poured out for all humankind, emptied to the last drop."

If we do not attend to God's presence in our midst and bring all our gifts to serving that presence in the world, we may find ourselves guarding a mausoleum.

Mortuary slab or alabaster jar

Once I went on a church crawl round Helsinki. I began at the Orthodox Cathedral – everywhere you looked were icons – the place was bursting with life - people everywhere keeping God company – in the pictures, in the building. Then I walked to the Lutheran cathedral. Very imposing, built of marble, but cold and empty – like a mausoleum. Then I realised that there wasn't a single symbol of resurrection in the building. Not even an empty cross. More than that, the whole place felt like a mortuary, and suddenly I saw that the communion table looked like a mortuary slab. It was all about absence, not presence

We're having a marble altar built for us here – by the same artist who created the East window above it. It makes me wonder: Which will it be to us? Mortuary slab or alabaster jar? I say alabaster jar even though that is not named in this version of the story of the woman and the perfume, but it is in Mark and Luke. Both forms of marble, but with such a totally different sensibility in their use. What will make the difference as to whether our marble altar will speak of absence or presence, distance or givenness? Of course there is the window above, and the placing of the cross in relation to it, and the messages of its aesthetics. Far more deeply than that it will be about how the altar becomes a focus for us recognising the living presence of Christ bringing together past, present and future in being given to us now – and how we give ourselves, are poured out, in return. How will our renewal in the eucharist affect the way we go out to each other, and to the world outside, beginning with the homeless in the pews and on the street outside. Will it enable us to be present to them?

You will always have the poor with you

There's some idea around that this story might marginalise the needs of the poor. Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 15:11, the entirety of which reads, "Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land.'"

It's Judas not Jesus who sets them up in opposition. What's really going on with him – how can we possibly know the anatomy of his journey to betrayal? Can John really judge him? At this point in the story, all I can see is a failure to be in the moment from him and to truly recognise what is happening. He's finding it too difficult to stay with the intense love and intimacy and sadness of parting. Is there a bit of disdain or superiority in his response to this action of abandonment? Neither qualities go with being truly given. Judas the treasurer can't recognise the multiplicatory qualities in the gospel economy of giving and being given.

It's not an either or – expressing the beauty of holiness or giving to the poor. Do we serve them by better by staying in control of our resources, or by trusting that we will be able to

respond in the abundance of God's resources – released through us and around us as we offer worship without restraint. But maybe a lot of us have inner treasurers like that.

What does it mean for us to be given?

Givenness leads us to a complete change in orientation. We can follow freely. Kierkegaard's title 'Purity of heart is to will one thing' carries its timbre. Imagine a life so given that how every part of it lived carried the same unmistakable stamp, or scent. Whether it was handling money, washing the floor, embracing a child, writing a book, giving someone a bed bath. A life lived with an overriding desire to discern the living presence of Jesus. Of the greater reality of life over death, of the victory of God's yes over all the no's presenting themselves to us.

Imagine being able to be in the now, not to let the pressure of time, busyness, persecution, fear, danger, rob us of the joy and belovedness which belong to us. Quite the reverse, finding it intensified – as I understand Jesus to experience this dinner with his friends – even when it is clamped in place by the hate and fear pursuing him on either side. The beauty and the intimacy of this act expressing givenness slow everything right down. This is not something which could be rushed.

We have a choice about how we live our lives: Whether in testimony to life or death; whether we trust that the *yes* will win out over the grip of the *no*. It's not that we won't face conflicts, hard choices, or distractions. What are we going to be given to? Will we dare to bring our gift spontaneously when the impulse is called forth from us. Or will we wait and waver, getting stuck in our fear of letting go. We might never again have this moment of expressing our love. Can we be truly present to life, truly present to the reality of the passion and death that has to be gone through to find it? This is what turns the hostess into a prophet. No human action is too ordinary to lack the capacity in it for worship, when undertaken with a single heart.

'See I am doing a new thing. Do you not perceive it?'