

Sunday 25 March: The Fifth Sunday of Lent - Passion Sunday

A pound of costly perfume

Readings: Isaiah 43:16-21; John 12:1-8

Thus says the Lord: "Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it. For I give water in the wilderness and streams in the desert"

Each year on Maundy Thursday, at Cathedrals throughout the land, there's a special eucharist at which the clergy are called together to renew their vows as Bishops, Priests and Deacons. At the same service, the oils used for anointing at ordination, confirmation, baptism and in ministry of healing are blessed by the Bishop and then distributed to the parish clergy. Personally, it's a service I've always valued as amidst the busyness that Holy Week brings, it gives time for focussing and reflecting on what it means to be called to God's service. The blessing of the oils themselves and what they express of that call and that ministry is an important part of that reflection.

We recently received information about this year's service, in which we were told that instead of taking our own containers for the oils, from now on, they would be distributed in reusable containers to speed up the process and to ensure that there's enough oil to go round. Now I do understand such practicalities have to be planned for, and my colleagues might tell you that conveying such detailed and practical instructions is very meat and drink of officious, heartless and budget-minded Associate Vicars! They're probably right, but I know that whatever hat I'm wearing, and whatever role I'm called to play, my gut reaction to the rationing of the blessed oils is to want to weep. Somehow it says to me, that in our desire for order and control, we've managed to turn these symbols of the overflowing stream of God's grace into commodities and consumables to be kept in bottles rather than to be given freely to a needy world.

Mary 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.

The story of the woman who anoints Jesus appears in various forms in all four of the Gospels, but as usual, John uses it in a very particular way. He puts it at as turning point in the Gospel and he uses his favourite device of contrast - here between Mary and her extravagant gesture of love, and of Judas, concerned about where the priorities lay; the contrast between grace unbounded and the desire to control - John uses that contrast to prompt us to ask where we stand. Through its place in the narrative, and through the characters in it, John confronts us with a choice and we have to decide - who is this man Jesus and how do we respond to him?

The story as John tells it makes the perfect reading for today, Passion Sunday, when turn with purpose to the way of the cross. From this point onwards there's only one way to go and that is to Jerusalem and the cross - or we abandon the journey altogether. In John's gospel this story follows on from the raising of Lazarus, which John sees as a pivotal moment about which it's impossible to remain neutral. For some it brought belief "Many of the Jews... who had seen what Jesus did believed in him". For others, it was the act that prompted them into the decision that this Jesus must die as in the words of Caiaphas the high priest "If we let him go on like this everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation". So from that day on they planned to put him to death.

John follows the anointing of Jesus with the moment when the Greeks come to the disciples saying “we wish to see Jesus” prompting Jesus him to respond “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified” and the inexorable journey on to the passion itself. From Lazarus to that moment, John gives us a gripping story of heightening tension. And in the middle of these crucial questions and moments of choice, a woman comes and anoints Jesus and grace flows into the deepening maelstrom of power and intrigue and darkness.

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At more than one level what Mary does is a completely scandalous act. Economically, it's outrageous - a pound of pure nard was probably worth a year's wages for the ordinary people of the time. Morally, it's more than a bit dodgy for a religious leader, a teacher of the faith, to have his feet publicly washed in such an almost erotic fashion by a woman.

And trying to imagine myself into that situation I find myself sympathising with Judas. I don't quite buy into the propaganda that John tries to sell us of Judas being a thief and wanting the money himself. I find this story most helpful in believing that Judas was actually a man of good intentions who simply got it wrong. Or perhaps more accurately, Judas was the one who could read the situation but lacked the vision to see a different way through it. The raising of Lazarus had put Jesus in firing line – he was a threat to the powers of Jerusalem. From Judas' perspective, the only way for Jesus to avoid the ultimate conflict was to play the game, watch his step, to follow the rules and to avoid any more scandal. The characters that John gives us present us with a contrast and a challenge. For Judas, the situation needed controlling and managing. For Mary, the situation demanded an act of costly and unmanaged love.

Scandalous though Mary's action may have been, Jesus understands immediately the priestly and the prophetic nature of this act – “She bought it for the day of my burial”. Somewhere in the heart of this extraordinary and scandalous gesture is the recognition that it was to be the death and resurrection of Jesus that would confront the gathering darkness that surrounded him. Mary's priestly and prophetic act that smothered the swirling stench of intrigue and violence and filled the house with perfume prefigured the Jesus' own death and resurrection - the ultimate priestly and prophetic act that would challenge the bottled-up and controlled limitations of political power and unlock the possibility of grace flowing freely and without limit in a parched and longing world.

Bishop John Taylor once wrote *'What turns a person into a prophet is not eloquence but vision, not getting the message across but getting the message. To see and then to realise that no one else is capable of seeing is a kind of dying.'*

Judas' ultimate crime was his inability to get the message that Jesus was to embody in his death and resurrection. Mary's ultimate grace was that of the true prophet – to get the message, to grasp the vision and to bear the cost of seeing differently.

Thus says the Lord: “Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it. For I give water in the wilderness and streams in the desert”

Who are we, who am I in this story? The more I reflected on that question in the past days, the more the words and sentiment of Austen Williams' prayer - “I am two people” came to mind.

This Passiontide, as I stand in the house at Bethany I am two people - and one longs with Mary to know the grace of the God who gives water in the wilderness – and one stands with Judas fearful of what may unfold if that grace is let loose. I am two people and one, like Judas, sees in the scaffolding of the spirit as a static means of shoring up all that may crumble and come crashing down around me, and one like Mary, sees in that scaffolding the dynamic means of transformation and new possibilities. This Passiontide, like so many others, I am two people, and one like Judas, is as reluctant as ever to face the cross and one like Mary, knows it to be the way to life.

Our Lenten theme, “The scaffolding of the spirit” came from the poetry of R S Thomas, and it was another R S Thomas poem that came to mind when I thought about the two people Judas and Mary at the heart of this story and at the heart of our turning towards the Passion of Christ. It’s a very short poem, entitled “Gift”:

*Some ask the world
and are diminished
in the receiving
of it. You gave me*

*only this small pool
that the more I drink
from, the more overflows
me with sourceless light.*

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