

Lent 5 John 12:1-8

So the countdown to Holy Week really begins, this 5th Sunday of lent, or passion Sunday, sees our gospel reading focus on the events leading up to the crucifixion in largely chronological order and in this year when we take most of our readings from Luke's gospel, we move today to John's gospel to perhaps fill in a gap or more deeply explore the events as we know them.

The other readings this morning explicitly point to God's plan to do things in a new way, they discourage us from living in the past and rather equip us to look ahead and expectantly wait for the new thing which God will do. This incident at Bethany would certainly have been very out of place in the daily lives of the disciples and should have been a clue that the prophecy of Isaiah was being played out before them.

Let's begin with a quick look at who was there, there was Jesus and his 12 disciples at the house of Lazarus, and in case of any doubt the reading tells us it is the same Lazarus that Jesus raised from the dead, and also living in that home were Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha. These friends of Jesus are well documented in the gospels and we feel we know them well, we have insight into their character, so it is no surprise that Martha has prepared a meal for this houseful and Mary is clinging to Jesus.

Yet this time, rather than just sitting at Jesus' feet to listen to him, Mary takes some perfume, in fact a lot of perfume, she lets down her hair which would have been a shocking act in such company or mainly men, almost an intimate act, and seemingly without a care for anyone else's opinion she anoints Jesus' feet.

It is very easy to read on and think of Judas as being the bad guy, after all we know the rest of the story and Judas is the betrayer, we are not surprised that in this weird encounter he was the one miserable enough to start an argument, but perhaps we are not always fair on Judas. The reading tells us Judas spoke up, which suggests the sort of scene where everyone has been stunned into silence, not knowing what to say, and one person gets it together to make a statement in response. Judas was the one able to say what the others may have been thinking. What might Martha have been thinking in all of this? She wasn't usually one to keep her opinions to herself surely she would have been embarrassed by her sister's display, angry about the waste of an expensive resource and confused by Jesus' response. And not only Martha, others in the room would have been feeling uncomfortable with this, also. Judas voiced that and confronted the act that was causing unease and tension within the group.

It must have been so frustrating for Jesus. He was facing down his own brutal death and this of all times was a time for his followers to be united behind him, for him to be sure that once he died and they were alone, that they could cope with that, that they could do a better job of understanding God's will, of recognising a prophecy or a spirit inspired situation when it was before them but still their minds were on earthly things, what will

people think of this man and woman and their relationship and how are we going to have enough money if we waste good perfume.

Because, make no mistake, Mary's actions were nothing short of a prophecy. Prophets are not only speakers of God's word that can be doers too. This act of anointing was in response to a revelation that Mary must have only then received, that Jesus was to be with them only a short time more. Her prophetic actions served to communicate with Jesus her understanding of what was bound to happen, and to reveal it further to the others there. Her gift was to worship him with everything that she had, giving of her material possessions but also getting on the floor, letting down her hair and ministering to him confidently and without shame or fear.

Having misunderstood the prophecy, however, Jesus speaks, not only to defend Mary but also to make his position clear. It sounds a little callous when Jesus says you will always have the poor but you will not always have me, selfish even and completely out of character in terms of Jesus' usual statements about how to treat the poor and the importance they will hold in the coming kingdom. But this is not about Jesus wanting to indulge, in fact he tells Mary to keep the rest of the perfume for the day of his burial, but rather this is a sign that God will be doing a new thing.

If we take Jesus' ministry all as a whole and ask why this prophecy of his burial is more important than helping some poor people with the proceeds from the sale of the oil, there is only one explanation. In order for Jesus to truly give hope to the poor, in order for him to bring about the upside down kingdom of God where kingdom blessings are heaped upon those scorned and shunned by the world, in order for things to really improve it was not a little bit of cash that was needed, but the sacrifice of Christ. The reason that at this late stage of ministry Jesus can put his own needs ahead of everyone else's is because he needs to be ready to make the ultimate sacrifice on behalf of everyone else.

Mary didn't truly understand what was to come, neither did Judas know that his objection allowed Jesus the opportunity to give his followers a glimpse of the future which with all of his other teachings of what was to happen to him. This was difficult to understand at the time but would become invaluable after the crucifixion as they remembered and came to understand that Jesus knew all along, he was letting it happen, positioning himself to ensure it did happen. Because when we accept that Jesus wasn't just an opposition voice of his time who was caught and killed for what he said, but rather God incarnate who did restorative work for humanity through his life, death and resurrection, then we can see how God indeed did a new thing for us and amongst us and how God continues to do new things in our lives day by day.

As we approach Palm Sunday next week and begin our annual walk to Calvary through holy week, may we be ever alert to God's renewing work in our lives and be workers for God in doing kingdom work in the lives of others.