

Passion Sunday, 13 March 2016 St Peter & St Paul, Farningham, John 12:1-8

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

In a rather disconcerting turn, right before Jesus enters his period of suffering, the Lenten readings move us to a place of joy and celebration. Isaiah promises the exiles a new salvation; God in Isaiah calls us to look to see the new thing that he is doing, beginning with a reminder of the past Exodus, the Israelites are then told to forget the former things, no matter how glorious they may have been, and told to look and see the new thing that God was doing. And Mary celebrates Jesus and her extravagant love for him through this almost embarrassing public display. This can be quite disturbing in the midst of the discipline and confession that usually symbolises the period of Lent. But, the message is clear – the voyage through the desert is a voyage toward life and joy, for it leads us to recognise, and own for ourselves, the truth that Christ brings us salvation – life in all its fullness.

Mary and the people of Israel all received this gift with incredible delight, and wild expressions of love. This passionate worship of the Saviour, is a challenge to us to allow our faith to be not just of the head, but of the heart, and not just of the way of justice, judgment, or righteousness, but also of the way of joy, celebration, and appreciation. And, although Jesus proclaims Mary's act as a preparation for his burial – with the darkness of the cross looming over this scene – the promise of God's life, and the demonstration that neither evil nor death can extinguish the love of Christ, give cause for celebration even as we prepare to remember his sacrifice.

Smells are evocative things aren't they; different smells conjure up different memories for many of us. The smell of a coal fire always reminds me of time spent in my grandmother's house. The smell of the sea brings memories of holidays and different perfumes draw different memories from my mind.

Imagine then that you are one of Jesus' disciples, you were in the room when Mary poured out her costly perfume over Jesus' feet...., imagine its powerful pungency as it seeped into every corner, every open pore, and the fragrance would have stayed with you for days....

Ponder the story afresh for a moment... how do you feel as you watch this amazing act of worship and devotion? What is going through your mind?

Are you comfortable, caught up in something wonderful, or are you shocked at the extravagance of it?

Mary's act is a pivotal moment of loveliness and intimacy between two, other, brutal sets of preparation for Jesus' death. John paints a very physical picture with the details about Mary's hair, and the fragrance of the perfume, as though he wants us to feel the comfort being offered to Jesus. At last, someone accepts and honours what he is to do, rather than denying or misunderstanding. But just before the anointing, we see the Jews planning how they will arrest Jesus, and immediately after the anointing, we see Judas preparing himself to betray.

In keeping with one of John's constant themes, there is no grey area in which we might try to understand either Judas or the Jews. In John's Gospel, there is always a stark choice between light and dark, and Judas had chosen the dark. Perhaps he might have tried to justify his anger at Mary's extravagance – after all, he could point to the many occasions when Jesus taught the importance of caring for the poor. But John allows him no such excuse. Fundamentally, in all the choices Judas has already made to bring him to this point in the story, he has been setting himself against Jesus.

Let's look at the passage in a little more depth. It was usual in Jesus' time for people to put their lifesavings into objects of great value. There were no banks, and so any additional capital was invested in objects that retained their value and so could be sold when money was needed. The jar of perfume that Mary broke to anoint Jesus' feet was probably just such a savings plan – Judas remarked that it was worth a year's wages! Yet, in her devotion to Jesus, and her commitment to his way, Mary happily gave up her wealth to celebrate the one who had brought life to her and her family – especially her once-dead brother Lazarus.

In contrast to Mary's act of celebration and devotion, John describes Judas' reaction. He was unimpressed and felt that this was an inappropriate waste. The Gospel writer indicates that this was not because he was particularly worried about the poor, but that he was a thief and would have preferred to have "diverted" some of this money into his own pockets. Nevertheless, Judas represents what happens when we allow our faith to become too severe, too poor in joy and celebration, and too weighed down by the cares of the world, or of our circumstances.

It can be easy, when faced with the suffering and evil of our world, to lose the ability to celebrate. It can be easy to become cynical, pessimistic, and despairing as we wait for God's justice to fill the world. Yet, if we allow ourselves to lose hope and joy, we also lose our ability to experience God's life, and to contribute to bringing healing and justice into our small corner. When we live from fear, we become self-protective hoarders who try to hold on to what we have in case things go wrong. Yet, in her love for Jesus and her trust of his way, Mary easily let go of what little wealth she had in order to give herself to the Reign of God that Jesus proclaimed. Mary recognised something new in Jesus, her long-time friend and teacher had exhibited new depths when he raised her brother from death to life, and those depths demanded that she look again. Perhaps some of his earlier teaching simply made sense; perhaps everything just fell into place and Mary saw Jesus fully for who he was, whatever it was it drew from her an extravagant action which was far more than a gesture. Following Jesus is not about becoming overly serious and sombre, and it's not about clinging to survival. Rather, the way of Jesus is the way of extravagant sharing, joyful celebration, and trusting love.

Jesus' final comment draws attention to the extravagant gift of love that he would soon be giving to the world – his own life. The message here is clear. A life lived in love will always be extravagant in the way it gives itself for others.

How can we be extravagant in love and celebration today and the days ahead?
In Jesus name, Amen.