

Lent 5 Year C 2022 (Passion Sunday)

Last week, I spoke about table fellowship - breaking bread together, sharing a meal with others; offering and accepting hospitality. And I said that sharing a meal with others meant accepting each other, honouring the other, bringing joy to all concerned.

In today's Gospel reading there is another meal, this time in the life of Jesus, not in a parable. Jesus and the disciples are in Bethany. John tells us that an unspecified 'they' give a dinner for him, and Martha served, as Martha always does. Perhaps we are in the house of Mary, Martha and Lazarus - although Mark (14.3) and Matthew (26.6) place this meal earlier in the story and they are all in the house of Simon the leper, a man who presumably had no wife, so Martha stepped in to help - as one does. Jesus and his disciples sit around the table (well, yes, I know they would have been lounging on cushions, but that is so hard for us to imagine, especially with my back, so bear with me); they are sitting around the table and Lazarus, Simon, and the neighbours are with them (the men, that is). They share a meal. Jesus looks around the table and there is Judas, one of the twelve, 'the one who was about to betray him'. If, in a country ruled by a dictator,

you knew someone was about to betray you to the secret police or the security services, would you sit at a celebratory meal with them? I don't think so. But Jesus sits at this table with Judas. Surely he knows? Of course he knows. During his Last Supper, only six days away, he will tell his Father 'I protected (those whom you gave me) in your name. Not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost'. (J17.12). Yet still he shares table fellowship with him, and will go on to wash his feet at that final meal. Judas will betray Jesus - and we are aghast - but so will Peter - three times! Are we aghast at Peter? Interestingly, Jesus never rebukes Judas, yet strongly rebukes Peter (M8.33) Judas feigns concern for the poor - Peter is told 'Feed my sheep'. Easy to talk but actions speak louder than words.

And it is an action, not words, that comes next. Mary, who had sat at the feet of Jesus when he had taught in her house, Mary who had fallen at his feet by the grave of her brother Lazarus, Mary who comes with her expensive ointment and wordlessly anoints his feet - the place where you would begin if you were anointing a body for burial - and not a word is spoken. And then she just shamelessly wipes his feet with her hair, just as he will wipe the disciples' feet at the Passover meal. And Jesus

graciously receives this extravagant gift - even though it could have been sold and the money given to the poor - because this extravagance isn't a show, a means of impressing people, an expression of social or financial superiority - look at me, tell me how wealthy and socially superior I am - this extravagance is an expression of love - love and gratitude; gratitude for the raising of her brother Lazarus, and love for her Master whom she knows she is about to lose. The raising of Lazarus was the final straw for the religious authorities - Jesus had to go! 'Let her alone', Jesus tells Judas 'she bought it for the day of my burial' - a fact the disciples still refuse to face.

Tomorrow he will ride triumphant into Jerusalem and the disciples will have delusions of grandeur. Mary will sit at home with her brother and sister and ponder the future - they will sit in the room where the fragrance of the nard still fills the air - perhaps today it will be the smell of freshly brewed coffee, or the smell of a pot of soup simmering on the stove or newly baked bread in a soup kitchen for hungry refugees or homeless people in Inverness - there are plenty of those around. Or it could be the smell of incense burnt in a church long after the service is over reminding visitors of the prayers said, the peace and hope

and mercy offered. We offer the opportunity to visitors to light a candle, should we offer also the chance to light an incense stick - so that my prayer might rise before you as incense and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice? Anything, surely, to encourage people to pray.

So, let us think about Mary and the nard - or the nameless woman in Mark and Matthew. 'What she has done will be told in remembrance of her (Mth26.13). In Matthew and Mark it is the disciples as a group who grumble, but John wants to concentrate on Judas, the betrayer, as he slips from light into darkness. It is a point we might take on board. Come Easter, will we spend more on flowers for the church than we will on stuff for the Food Bank, or donations for the Shoe Box appeal? BUT, and there is always a BUT, 'leave her alone'. Sometimes sacrificial giving should be recognised for the love it is, for the joy of giving, for the happiness it gives others. If only life weren't so complicated! But I come back to Mary and Judas - the imperfect disciple and the perfect disciple. We are not asked to identify with one or the other - how could we? We are, each one of us, I think, a combination of the two. In Mary we see someone who is full of adoration and gratitude. Silently, she draws our attention to

Jesus, the one whom she anoints for burial. In Judas we see someone who is frustrated by prayers not being answered, or not being answered in the way he had hoped - haven't we all been there? He is someone who will push to get what he thinks should happen, and in his disappointment turns the wrong way. We could say they are the righteous and the unrighteous. And they are both at this meal, the faithful and the unfaithful. Both are included, because both are loved by God. Both are in the bright light the cross casts across our dark world, because Jesus chooses it to be so.

When I get things wrong, I thank God for that.