

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon – Passion Sunday**

**3<sup>rd</sup> April 2022**

**All Saints' Marseille**

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25 years ago this summer a young woman was involved in an accident while on holiday in Paris. The following morning a stunned world awoke to the news that Diana, Princess of Wales had died. The public outpouring of grief that followed was immense. Huge numbers of mourners travelled to leave flowers at the gates of the royal palaces. At the time, I was working near the Tube station closest to Buckingham Palace. Outside the station people set up stalls selling flowers, and for several days and nights the air was thick with their scent. A few commentators began to say that the quantity of flowers being bought was inappropriate and that the money would have been better given to the charitable causes with which the Princess was associated. But they were missing the point. I came home one night to find a message on my answerphone from a Christian woman I knew well. The message said simply: 'I've got it: it's the oil of spikenard.'

The scene is our Gospel reading today is as potent as it is brief. Today is Passion Sunday, the day our Lenten focus begins to contemplate Jesus's journey towards Jerusalem, and to the suffering and death it will bring. In our imagination we travel with the disciples, who are at last beginning to realise the significance of what is about to happen. It is apt, therefore, that the Lectionary today gives us the story of the anointing of Jesus.

Both the Gospels of Matthew and Mark include the story of an unnamed woman who anoints Jesus's head with costly nard. There are similarities in the different versions of the story. In Matthew and Mark the anointing is shown as an act of devotion; some who are present tell the woman off for wasting money; and Jesus defends her, associating her action with preparing him for his death. In Luke there's a slightly different emphasis. The woman is referred to as a 'sinner', and the scene takes place in the house of Simon the Pharisee. The woman in Luke wets Jesus's feet with her tears, dries them with her hair and anoints them with perfume. The point of this version is the repentance of the anointer: Jesus forgives her sin because of her act of love.

The Fourth Gospel appears to combine the two traditions. As in Matthew and Mark, the setting is Bethany, but here the unnamed woman is identified with Mary of Bethany, and the story is located in the home she shares with her sister Martha and their brother Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised in the previous chapter. The reported cost of the perfume is the same as in Mark's Gospel – three hundred denarii, the equivalent of a year's working wage. The anonymous 'some' who protest at the waste of money in Matthew and Mark are in John's account identified instead with Judas. John is deliberately creating a contrast between the thinking of two disciples of Jesus – Mary and Judas.

Mary's act is filled with meaning. First, it's an act of humility, foreshadowing Jesus's washing of the disciples' feet in the following chapter – the word used for 'wiping' the feet is the same in both stories. Secondly, it's an act of gentleness. John draws attention to the comfort it must have brought Jesus – the smell of the perfume, the touch of her hair, the attention given to his feet as they prepare to walk the way of the Cross. Someone is finally accepting and honouring what he is about to do, after all the misunderstanding shown by

Jesus's other followers. The storm clouds are gathering. Tomorrow he will enter Jerusalem, in the events we will recall on Palm Sunday.

Another point about Mary's gesture is that it is transgressive. For a woman to touch a man's feet in public, let alone wipe them with her hair, would have been seen as shocking, even more so than now. It was provocative, and it provoked Judas to criticise her, though in terms of the wastefulness of the gesture rather than the inappropriateness of the contact. One can see where Judas was coming from: to smear the equivalent of €20,000 on someone's feet was a reckless thing to do. But to criticise it on those grounds was missing the point.

The point about it is its very extravagance. It represents an overflowing of love and generosity, like the act of God in creation, like the gift of Christ to us. The Gospel writer is encouraging us to see that there are broadly two ways to live – Judas's way and Mary's way. I wonder which we usually choose. Judas's way is shown as calculating, mean-spirited, about hoarding. Mary's way is shown as generous, beautiful, about outpouring. It is clear which way Jesus endorses. This, he suggests, is a true representation of me. This gesture is an icon of my incarnation and my passion.

So Mary's gesture offers a clue to how we might live our lives in the Kingdom of God - the Kingdom where anxiousness about scarcity gives way to a sense of God's abundance, and where service to one another is what we are called upon to give.

There is another anointing in this Gospel, in Chapter 19. After Jesus's crucifixion, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, two secret but well connected disciples of Jesus, ask Pilate for permission to take away his body. They bring a mixture of myrrh and aloes, 'weighing about a hundred pounds'. Again, it is an extravagant quantity. It's almost the only other time we see anyone doing something kind

and generous to Jesus in the Passion narrative, caring for his body. What does that say to us? Are we prepared to be extravagant for him? Extravagant in our gratitude for what he has done for us? We know from our emotional lives that they are richer and more fulfilling when we give space to gratitude. The same is true for our spiritual lives. Gratitude to God is free, an act of love, and all our love to God is in response to God's love for us.

Let's come back to the exchange between Jesus and Judas. Jesus's response to Judas's criticism (why wasn't the money given to the poor?) calls for an integration of mind and heart. In following Christ we are not given a choice between devotion to God and committed social action. We can, and should, do both. As the Gospel says, we 'always have the poor with [us]' and we must never forget their needs or cease to be outraged by the injustices of the world. Loving our neighbours as ourselves is what we are called to do, every day of our lives. But we are also called to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. This scene reminds us of the summary of the law which Jesus himself gave us, and that in following it we are liberated from our focus on self, scarcity and suspicion.

So it's a potent one, this brief scene, designed to make us reflect. How often do we say, like Judas, that 'the money could have been better spent'? Yet, in Mary's case, might we not conclude that spending money on a gesture that is still being talked about two thousand years later, a gesture so beautifully reflecting both the action of God in creation and the action of Christ in pouring out his life for us, was actually money well spent? Perhaps that's what the message on my answerphone meant, 25 years ago.

Amen.