

Lent 5 / Passion Sunday, April 6th, 2025

10.00 Holy Communion, All Saints Oakham

Isaiah 43. 16-21, Philippians 3:4-14, John 12:1-8

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

When I heard that the announcement of Stephen's departure was to be made today, I gave some serious thought as whether or not I should throw out the sermon I was writing and start again. But on reflection I decided not too, because I think that Stephen probably wouldn't have wanted that, but also, in perhaps rather an indirect way, our readings are relevant to the current uncertain situation we find ourselves in as a church. So, for the next few minutes, I will think primarily about our gospel reading and what it has to say to us. It is the rather lovely story of the anointing of Jesus with oil. The story is found in three of the four gospels – Matthew, Mark and John and is set in Bethany near Jerusalem during the period we now know as Holy Week. In John's account the story is an integral part of a long story line in which we see events closing in on Jesus as he approaches his destiny on the cross. A couple of chapters before, we have a long description of disagreements with the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem, that included the "I am the Good Shepherd" discourse, that began to turn violent, and moves were made to capture and arrest Jesus. At that point Jesus and his disciples left in something of a hurry and established themselves in a place of relative safety over the other side of the Jordan, where he continued his preaching and teaching ministry. It was there, some time afterwards, that Jesus heard that his friend Lazarus, brother of Martha and Mary, was ill. After waiting for some days, he announced to this disciples that he was going to Jerusalem. This was met with incredulity by his followers – hadn't they just escaped from there - and it was clear to Jesus that in answering the call to come to Lazarus, he was heading towards his own death. And we know the story. Lazarus was dead by the time Jesus arrived and his sisters were distraught. Jesus, in one of his greatest miracles, raised Lazarus from the dead, the news of which spread far and wide. The Jewish council, the Sanhedrin, became increasingly concerned that Jesus was attracting many followers, and that this could lead to rebellion against Rome that would be brutally suppressed, the loss of their power and the destruction of what remained of the Jewish state. And we read that Caiphas, the high priest for the year, uttered the startling, almost prophetic, statement.

It is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.

The council conceived a plot to kill Jesus and remove that threat. In response, Jesus and his disciples withdrew again, but not far this time, just to the edge of the Judean wilderness. From there they travelled to Bethany, where the events we read in the gospel took place, Matthew and Mark setting it perhaps two days before the Passover feast, and John, our reading today, setting it six days before the Passover, in other words the day before Palm Sunday. It is impossible to be certain when the event happened, not least

because it is highly likely that the gospel writers were using different religious calendars in setting their chronology. But the events they describe are very similar. According to Matthew and Mark they were in the house of Simon the Leper. John is not specific on this, but does give us details of who was there – Martha serving, Lazarus her brother at table and their sister Mary. Then we are told a woman anointed Jesus – in Matthew and Mark, it involved pouring the oil over Jesus' head, and in John it was poured over Jesus's feet and wiped with the woman's hair. The woman isn't named in Matthew and Mark, but in John she is identified as Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. In all three, there is then the criticism that the anointing oil could have been sold and the money given to the poor. In John's gospel again, the source of this criticism is given as Judas, and his motive is far from pure. Then Jesus replied and indicated that in effect he had been anointed for his burial and then the phrase that has caused some consternation down the centuries.

You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.

So the story in all three gospels is the same in its essentials, and the differences in timing are no more than would be expected given the frailty of human memory. But the differences are interesting in their own right, particularly the omission of names in Matthew and Mark – and indeed the omission of the entire story of Lazarus. I think the reason for this is quite straightforward. The meal took place at a dangerous time, when the authorities were trying to silence Jesus, and would I suspect have been a tense and nervous affair. When Matthew and Mark were written perhaps 20 years after his death, there was a reluctance to identify, in writing at least, the characters involved, as it would, even then, have put them in danger. By the time John came to write his gospel however, probably 20 or more years after the others, that danger had passed and indeed it is likely that Martha, Mary and Lazarus were all dead by then, and there was no need to protect their identity.

So we have a meal, in the run up to the Passover, which would have been held in private, if not in secret. It was hosted by close friends of Jesus, but perhaps not in their house, with Lazarus, the living proof of Jesus' power, being there with them. It was an uncertain time – possibly only Jesus knew how things were going to turn out. A worrying time, where the future, even what was going to happen over the next few days, was far from clear. And a dangerous time for all concerned. And into that Mary, the more reflective of the sisters, brought out this jar of very expensive ointment, and poured it over Jesus feet, rubbing it in with her hair. The act of undoing her hair to use it in this way would have been seen as shocking and indecent in its own right. And perhaps also, to add the accounts from the other gospels, she poured it over his head too. What on earth did she think she was doing? That is probably an unanswerable question – Jesus interpreted it there and then as pre-figuring the anointed that would be given to the dead. But for Mary, I suspect it was a impulsive act of overwhelming love, and pity and concern. And in doing so, she did something that was quite beautiful and striking, the fragrance filled the house, an act that was remembered down the ages. She anointed Jesus in the face of criticism, that was in some ways perfectly valid – the money *could* have been used for the poor. But Jesus supports her. Yes, looking after the poor is important, and always will be, but as the central act of history draws close, there were other priorities.

The gospel writer John, after many years of reflection, came to understand that there was a deeper meaning. The account of the meal at Bethany is followed, by a description of the plot to kill Lazarus as well as Jesus, reinforcing the need perhaps felt by Matthew and Mark to keep his name out of their accounts, but then we have the account of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. And there Jesus lived out the prophecy of Zechariah

Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!

The crowds addressed Jesus in the words of a royal psalm – a psalm addressed to the king
'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord — the King of Israel!'

In the Old Testament, the primary purpose of anointing was to consecrate kings and priests, and I think that is probably how John came to see Mary's act – as an anointing for his burial certainly, but also as an anointing of Jesus in his priestly and kingly roles, that were conferred through the cross, through his death and resurrection, rather than through some grand coronation ceremony. And this is possibly another reason why the earlier gospels avoid naming the protagonists – the anointing of Jesus in this way was an act of treason and rebellion which would have put Mary in great danger.

The story line doesn't end there. The events of Holy Week unfold, and in the next chapter John gives us his version of the last supper, with the emphasis on Jesus washing his disciples feet. Here we have the anointed king, taking the role of the servant. An astonishing turning over of the concept of kingship. Here he kneels before his disciples, cleansing them in a pre-figuring of what the shedding of his blood on the cross will achieve, and in some way anointing them for service, echoing the action of Mary in a remarkable way.

But back to today's reading. Whatever the meaning of the act of anointing, whatever the reason for it, it remains as an act of beauty, an act of devotion and love administered at a traumatic and uncertain time. An act of faith in Jesus and in his teaching that the Kingdom of God was coming, that looked forward with optimism to the realisation of that teaching. An act of confidence in whatever the future might bring. We find the same theme in our other readings for today. Our Old Testament reading records the words of a prophet, spoken 2500 years ago to the exiled Jewish nation in Babylon. They had been there for around seventy years, and had grown used to captivity, just getting on with the humdrum day to day things, not looking back as it was too painful, and not looking forward to a world without hope. But the prophet came to them with a picture of release and restoration.

I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

He challenges them to hear, to lift up their heads and see, even in their hopelessness that God is acting. In a similar way, our Epistle from Philippians is written while Paul is in prison, either in Rome or Ephesus, and in the hopelessness of the situation, there must have been a temptation to despair and depression, to mope and feel sorry for himself. But that is not how Paul reacts.

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.... I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

And we can see the commonality between the readings – this urging to lift up our heads, to look to the future whatever our current situation. The words of Paul's letter to the Romans come back to me

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We live in profoundly uncertain times, with international diplomacy in turmoil, international friends turning into enemies overnight the world economy in danger of collapse, tariffs imposed on trade around the world, even it would seem on the penguin population of Heard Island. And a frantic rush to re-arm, for which resources will inevitably be taken from those who need it most, the poor who are indeed still with us. And pushing the existential issue of climate change and what should be done about it way down the agenda. The institutional church too is in a state of turmoil, unable to agree on major issues, finding it impossible in some cases to appoint bishops, all hindering the message of the gospel. And doubtless many here will be facing their own personal traumas over health, family issues or other circumstances. And of course, we as a church family are about to enter a time of uncertainty, not knowing what the future will hold as Stephen and Cally leave us. A normal reaction in such times is either to hide away or just to get on with the routine and the mundane affair of living, not to think too far ahead to an uncertain future. Indeed, many people are avoiding the news these days – it is just too much to cope with. But we might paraphrase Paul

For I am convinced that neither presidents, nor tariffs, nor wars, nor earthquakes, nor bishops, nor synods, nor sickness, nor trauma, nor interregnum, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Over the centuries, the Christian message of hope, of the promise of eternity, has inspired music, art and poetry of great beauty, worship that leads us to the gates of heaven, and the beauty and fragrance of lives given in service of others. And our readings today urge us to look forward, even in our current uncertainties, to carry on creating harmony and beauty in all our doings, to carry on doing God's work in prayer and service, but also to lift up our heads and see whatever "new things" God is doing and to follow where he leads, even if the end of the journey isn't clear, or indeed is one that we will never see. At the end of his autobiography, when he was close to death, the Northern Irish politician Seamus Mallon writes some profoundly moving words.

"As I prepare to take my leave of our shared home place, I find comfort in an old Greek proverb: A society grows great when old men plant trees in whose shade they know they will never sit"

As for a society, so to for a church.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen