

SERMON PREACHED BY THE REVEREND JONATHAN ANDREW
AT 8AM SERVICE OF HOLY COMMUNION ON 7 APRIL 2019 – LENT 5

Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8

Our Lenten journey is moving on – drawing to its climax. And the Eucharistic Prayer that we'll use in a few minutes has changed, as we move from an emphasis on Lenten discipline, to a more specific focus on Jesus' Passion. The recurring rhythm of the Christian Year invites us to follow the path of the story of Jesus' time on earth but, as the story unfolds, it's not like a novel where we turn the page to find out what happens next. All but the newest Christians know something of the big picture. And so, as we live in the moment, we cannot but look, not just back to the history of our faith but also forward to the coming well-known events. The church year reinforces our memory and takes us deeper, but we cannot and should not avoid our knowledge of what comes next.

And with that in mind, I'm going to invite you this morning to look again at the Gospel story which I've just read. If we were that sort of church, I'd now be encouraging you to reach for your Bibles and bury your noses in John chapter 12, but I'm not going to do that, because I want you to listen to the words and to use your imagination to see, not words on a page, but events in a real home, and to think about where you might be in this story.

And so the scene is set - "Six days before the Passover". The events are set at a moment in time, but not just any time – the day of sacrifice is fast approaching. Jesus and his disciples have set their face towards Jerusalem – we know for sure what will happen there as the Passover Lambs are slaughtered – and Jesus' followers have been forewarned, although not all were listening or could take it in. A supper with friends should be a joyful occasion, but at this party the atmosphere isn't relaxed, an almost unbearable tension hangs in the air - "Six days before the Passover".

The time is set, but also the place – Bethany – a few miles from Jerusalem – a little village, but with a name of some significance as the episode unfolds – Bethany means, 'the house of the poor'. And, of course, Jesus and his companions are not just anywhere in the village – they are visiting Lazarus and his sisters – "Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead" only a short while before. Surely this should be a celebration of unalloyed joy, but the tension hangs in the air - "Six days before the Passover". We don't know much about Lazarus, although from the other gospels we might conjecture that he was a Pharisee or a recovered leper. But perhaps more significantly, in Luke's gospel, there's another Lazarus, a poor man without his own house, but who died and was received into the arms of Abraham, while the rich man Dives, who had ignored his neighbour's plight, burned in the fires of Hell – hold that thought in your head as the story unfolds.

In our little story, Lazarus' sister Martha gets just two words "Martha served", but that's enough. From the other gospels we know Martha well, and that's what she did – she served – bustling around, dusting, tidying, cooking - doing the work, while others lazed around listening to Jesus. Can you again feel her silent resentment – Martha the self-imposed martyr, 'distracted from distraction, by distraction'.

They are 'at the table', I suspect eating in the Greco-Roman style, reclining on couches, heads close together for conversation and sharing whatever modest delicacies the family could afford, legs spread out behind them, but then comes the moment of drama,

not to say of cringe-making embarrassment. Mary, that leading member of the Jesus fan club lets herself down in public. Indeed, not just lets herself down, but lets her hair down, unbraids her crowning glory in a way that only a woman of the streets would do, and then proceeds to pour perfume over Jesus' feet and use those long black, lustrous tresses to wipe them dry. And, in case you think John is laying it on a bit thick, just read the corresponding passage in Luke, where the floods of tears and the kissing of his feet are spelled out. Such physical intimacy would be considered pretty inappropriate in polite company today here in enlightened western Europe – in the Middle East in the First Century – well, I need say no more!

And this isn't just any old perfume – nard – the Chanel No 5 of Jesus' day. The denarius was the going rate for a 12-hour shift for a farm labourer, so 300 denarii is a year's wages. Heaven knows where Mary got the money from! But nard was more than a cosmetic – it was used like incense in some Temple rituals and, of course, to disguise the stench of death. Not a subtle scent, so "The house (the house of the poor) was filled with the fragrance".

So Judas asks his question "Why was this perfume not sold and the money given to the poor?" It's not unreasonable, but Jesus duly puts him in his place "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." "Six days before the Passover", Jesus is now a dead man walking.

So where is each of us in this story?

- Are we the careful, risk-averse Judas, who can work out the price of anything at a glance and say what appears to be the right thing about God's option for the poor (and even possibly mean it), but who as yet knows little of the value of anything?
- Are we the hard-working Martha, beavering away in the background, feeding our loneliness and resentment with misplaced activity?
- Are we Mary, the person not afraid to let our hair down in public – to show our passion, where our allegiance lies? Do we see in the death and resurrection of our brother, Jesus, something that sets us free from fear of what the world might say, that enables us to overcome the stench of physical and spiritual death round about us with the richness of his perfume?
- Indeed, dare we claim that we are in some sense Lazarus, reborn?
- Or are we like another character, not mentioned but almost certainly present in the room? Peter, enthusiastic and fired up as always, but not yet really seeing the point. Peter watching Jesus accept the service of Mary and her willing self-abasement, but Peter who, despite all that, only five days later doesn't want Jesus to wash his feet. Are we, like him, still afraid of openness and vulnerability – afraid of that intimate personal touch - a fear that Peter only overcomes when he has completed his Lenten journey of failure and acknowledgement of failure, and a surrender that can only be expressed after another death, and at after another meal on the lakeside, a surrender expressed in four words "I love you, Lord".

Amen