

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Lent

The Gospel passage we heard today is one of my favourites. Jesus is in Bethany, in the home of Lazarus. This was a place where he was known, where he was welcome, and where he was safe. It is a place where he can have a moment of respite in a world where he was facing public criticism, opposition and hatred. In the previous chapter of the Gospel it is recorded that Jesus no longer went around openly, because the authorities were planning to kill him.

Jesus needs this time with his disciples and friends. He needs the comfort of peace and conversation with those who are dear to him. He goes to the home of Lazarus, to spend time there with Lazarus, Mary and Martha, and his disciples. Martha offers them the hospitality of a meal, which fits her character and nature. She is generous in providing for her guests and ensuring their comfort and that they are nourished.

But during the dinner, something extraordinary happens. Mary anoints Jesus with the expensive perfume.

She takes the perfume, most likely something carefully kept and reserved for when it is needed, and decides that it is needed now. She breaks it open, and begins to use it.

The description of this action is so evocative ... Mary anointing Jesus' feet, and then wiping the excess oil away with her hair ... The scent of the perfume filling the house with fragrance ... It is a moment of deeply personal connection (and we should try not to be embarrassed by the intimacy of the action), and it is a moment of great beauty too, and one to be cherished and appreciated.

But then Judas opens his mouth, ruining that moment. 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' You might begin to think that this is a reasonable question, but in the next breath John reminds us that Judas is the one who will betray Jesus, and that his complaint about the cost of the perfume is not based on a philanthropic desire to help the poor, but because it would increase the funds he was stealing from.

Amid the outrage, Jesus is a voice of calm explanation. He tells them, "leave her alone", silencing any further criticism of Mary and what she has done.

He explains that Mary bought the perfume "so that she might keep it for the day of my burial". Mary has anointed Jesus in preparation for what is to come. She has performed a prophetic act of love.

It was this aspect of Mary's action that inspired Brian Wren to write the hymn 'a prophet-woman broke a jar', celebrating Mary as she prepared Christ for dying. From its opening with one Mary, it expands to celebrate another Mary as the apostle to the apostles, proclaiming the truth of the resurrection in the second verse.

This passage, and this hymn, acknowledges and celebrates the role women had within the believers that surrounded Jesus during his earthly ministry, and those who subsequently believed and lived their faith. We need people like Mary who are willing to lavishly express their faith and their belief, breaking open that costly perfume in order to do what they feel is needed at that time. We need that boldness and confidence, and that love and reverence, because they are gifts through which the Church is enriched and blessed.

That leads Brian Wren to proclaim that the Holy Spirit calls people to use their gifts in the service of God, the Church, and the community of faith. "The Spirit knows, the Spirit calls", he writes, and long may the Holy Spirit continue to call people to serve in whatever way their skills and abilities permit them, so we may serve the people of God long into the future.

That notion of service is spoken of in Jesus' final remark in the passage. It is a two-fold reminder. 'You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.' First he reminds the disciples of their duty to care for the poor and those in need, and he explains that this is an ongoing and significant compassionate duty. Jesus has always taught his disciples to act with empathy to those in need, and it is through acts such as these that their faith in Jesus and in God will be demonstrated.

But the final part of that sentence is the more important. 'You do not always have me'. Jesus is warning his disciples that there is a time coming, and it will be soon, when he will no longer be with them. He is telling them to make the most of his presence with them, to learn from him and to appreciate all that he teaches them, because it cannot last forever.

Jesus chooses to make his way to Jerusalem. He will face everything that will take place within that city, from his rapturous entry to his suffering and death. And it will be the place of his resurrection.

Jesus, anointed by Mary, is now prepared for that journey. God bless Mary for that anointing, and the strength that it offered Jesus to make his final journey into Jerusalem.

Rev. Dr Emily Fraser
All Saints, South Hobart and St Raphael's, Fern Tree
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