

Message for April 3, 2022

Lent 5 & Communion

John 12:1-8

It was a Saturday evening and the room must have been filled with tension. Jesus and his disciples were having dinner at the home of Lazarus and his sisters. Lazarus was one of Jesus' best friends and a few weeks earlier he had become deathly ill. Lazarus' sisters, Martha and Mary, had promptly sent word to Jesus begging him to come and heal their brother and Jesus had agreed. By the time that Jesus arrived however Lazarus was both dead and buried.

When Martha heard that Jesus had finally come, she went to meet him while Mary remained in the house. Martha could have said many things to Jesus, but instead she uttered one of the most poignant and faith-inspired statements of the entire Bible:

“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. And even now, I know that whatever you ask of God, God will give you.”

Even though it seemed as if Jesus had completely and utterly failed her, Martha still believed that Jesus could and would do something. Her faith and trust were not misplaced either as Jesus performed his greatest miracle of all, raising Lazarus from the dead. Quite predictably this miracle had a huge impact on everyone and that included the religious authorities in nearby Jerusalem. Up to this point they had been content to try and ignore Jesus, hoping that he was just a seven-day wonder who would soon go away, but now they could no longer ignore him. Jesus had to be dealt with before he, as they saw it, totally perverted the Jewish faith.

Knowing this, the smart and prudent thing for Jesus to have done was to have kept a low profile but instead he started to plan a grand entry into Jerusalem. Entering the city as the prophets had predicted that the Messiah would, would publicly proclaim once and for all who and what he truly was.

It was the night before the grand entry and as I have already said, Jesus and his disciples were at the home of Lazarus and his sisters for dinner, and the room was filled with tension. Then Mary suddenly did something both wonderful

and shocking. When the meal was finished, Mary entered the room carrying a jar of pure nard or ointment. She stooped down in front of Jesus, poured the ointment on his feet, let down her long hair, and then proceeded to wipe his feet with it.

Now this behaviour was not only strange but it was also positively scandalous as well. This of course was Mary's way of thanking Jesus for what he had done weeks earlier when he had brought her dead brother back to life but even so, her behaviour still shocked everyone. A good, respectable Jewish woman back then would never ever let down her hair in front of a man who was not her husband! And then to wipe his feet with it? Such behaviour was positively scandalous and besides, think of how much that ointment was worth! It was worth a year's pay to the average worker! As shocked and as scandalized as everyone was though, no one said a word except Judas. He objected to Mary's behaviour saying that the ointment should have been sold and the proceeds used to help the poor. Jesus however had no time or patience for Judas' criticism. He silenced Judas saying that money could be given to the poor at any time, but there were now precious few opportunities left to do something kind for him.

This public dressing down humiliated Judas and there can be little doubt that it contributed to his decision to betray Jesus. The stage was now set for Palm Sunday and all that followed but when we think about it though, the behaviour of Mary and Judas provides us with quite a contrast. On the one hand there is extravagant Mary. She was so grateful for all that Jesus had done that she simply had to express her joy and love. So what if the ointment was worth a year's income? So what if her behaviour shocked everyone? Her love knew no bounds and simply had to be expressed. Judas on the other hand was the practical and down-to-earth one. Unlike Mary, his love had its bounds. But what of us? During the next two weeks we will remember the amazing love of God for each and every one of us as revealed by the cross and the empty tomb, but what is our response to this amazing love that will not let us go? Is no sacrifice too great, or is any sacrifice too great? To put it another way, which one do we have more in common with, Mary or Judas?

There are times in life when we are like Mary and are so full of faith and commitment. At other times though we have more in common with Judas. Our faith and commitment have its limits and like Judas we may sometimes even

betray Jesus, even as we loudly proclaim how much we love him. The one thing that we should never ever forget though is that Judas, despite his faults and failures, was still just as much a disciple of Jesus as Peter and the others. Like them, Judas too gave up everything to follow Jesus. Somewhere along the way though he lost his way leading up to his betrayal of Jesus with a kiss. And yet, despite doing this, all was not lost for Judas and, by implication, all is not lost for us either.

The Bible tells us that Judas, overwhelmed by remorse, committed suicide shortly before Jesus was crucified. In the early church though there was a very strong tradition that says that Judas' suicide was born, not out of despair, but rather out of hope. Judas knew that if God was just, then he would go straight to hell. If however God was also merciful, then Jesus would go to hell to save the damned. And if Jesus descended into hell to save the inhabitants there, then presumably he would also save Judas. As odd as it may sound then, Judas's suicide was not an act of despair but rather an act of hope; only by getting to hell before Jesus, could Judas hope to get to heaven. In the words of Frederick Buechner:

"It's a scene to conjure with. Once again they met in the shadows, the two old friends, both of them a little worse for wear after all that had happened, only this time it was Jesus who was the one to give the kiss, and this time it wasn't the kiss of death that was given."

None of us of course know whether this ancient tradition is true or not, but it does bear witness to the early church's conviction that no one, including Judas, is beyond the scope of God's mercy, forgiveness and redemption. There are times when we may be like Mary whose faith and commitment knew no bounds. And sometimes we may be like Judas and our faith and commitment only goes so far. Sometimes like Judas we may betray Jesus even as we say how much we love him and how committed we are. Regardless of whether we are more like Mary or more like Judas though, all is not lost. We are not lost. We aren't because of what we will be remembering during the next two weeks, and there is no greater reminder of Jesus' death and resurrection than the sacrament that we will now celebrate. So let us now, in the words of this morning's communion hymn, "taste afresh the calm of sin forgiven", "giving sweet foretaste of the festal joy, the Lamb's great bridal feast of bliss and love."

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, hear us as we come to you in prayer on this, the first Sunday of another month.

We thank you for the gift of this month just begun that is characterized by life returning to your creation after the winter. We thank you for the life now appearing in our gardens and the return of the birds as well. We thank you for the spiritual life that we celebrate as we draw ever closer to Good Friday and Easter Sunday. We thank you for the lives of our loved ones, and all that sustains our lives, both physically and spiritually. Above all though we thank you for the holy mysterious, loving wonder that is you, for you truly are the source of all life, now and forevermore.

We pray this day for all for whom life is not so good. We pray for all who are ill, whether it be of mind, body, or soul. We pray for all who mourn, and we pray too for all who feel worn down and worn out, not just by the major issues and problems of life, but also by the wear and tear of day-to-day life.

This past week we witnessed the delegation of the Inuit, Metis and First Nations at the Vatican and we pray for a true reconciliation between our indigenous peoples and our larger society. We pray for all whose lives were and still are devastated by their experiences in the residential schools. Grant we pray, that we may learn from our past so that there may never again be such a tragedy.

We pray this day for the people of Ukraine; those caught up in the fighting and those who have fled. We pray for the sake of healing for those who have been wounded by the horror of what is happening there, both physically and mentally. We pray for an end to the invasion and the fighting. We pray that peace may be restored.

With this in mind, we pray for the ministry of your church and your disciples throughout the whole of your world. May we do our best, secure in your love and forgiveness, to be dedicated followers of your Son, faithfully fulfilling his ministry here on earth as best we can.

We ask these things in your Son's name. Amen

