

5<sup>th</sup> of Lent C: Isaiah 43.16-21; Philippians 3.4b-14; John 12.1-8

Before we get into the heart of today's Gospel we need to say something about Mary. Because there are a lot of Marys in the Gospels, just as there are a lot of Johns. Today's Gospel has some similarities to stories in Matthew, Mark and Luke where an unnamed sinful woman came and anointed Jesus with ointment and bathed his feet with her tears. She was someone who knew her need of forgiveness. For a long time this woman was identified with Mary Magdalene from whom seven demons had been cast out. And Mary Magdalene was thought of as a sinful woman and was often portrayed wearing red. Which was completely unjust as you will know if you have seen the recent Mary Magdalene film which I do recommend. And then we have today's story of another Mary anointing Jesus' feet with nard. And because of its similarity with the story in the other gospels, this Mary was conflated with Mary Magdalene and the sinful woman. That is until 1969 when the calendar of saints was revised and Mary of Bethany was recognised as someone distinct from Mary Magdalene. I hope you are following this. I shall be asking questions later.

Anyway, Mary of Bethany, in our story today, was the sister of Martha and Lazarus. They were friends of Jesus and he seems to have enjoyed visiting their home. You may remember on another occasion that Martha became angry with her sister Mary because while she was slaving away in the kitchen, Mary was sitting at Jesus' feet, listening to what he had to say. And this attentiveness perhaps enabled her to realise what was about to happen while many others around Jesus did not. Mary sensed that Jesus did not have very long to live and was anointing him for his burial. This was a priestly action but it was one which was not understood by others who were present. God was about to do a new thing but only Mary perceived it.

We are told that the ointment cost around 300 denarii. That's nearly a year's wages for a day labourer. A huge amount of money. And not surprisingly, those who were present grumbled about the expense. In the stories in Matthew and Mark, the grumblers are not named but in John's account it is Judas who objects. The Gospel writer makes it clear that Judas was not really concerned about the poor. He kept the common purse and was a thief.

Why did he keep the common purse? We don't know. Matthew the tax collector might have been a better choice. But John seems to be giving Judas a motive for handing Jesus over to the authorities. He portrays Judas as avaricious. He wanted money. And that reputation was to have terrible repercussions down the centuries, particularly for relations between Christians and Jews.

Judas does have a point though. The ointment could have been sold and the money given to the poor. Jesus defends Mary. Leave her alone he says. She has anointed me for burial. She has seen what others have not. The poor will always be with but you will not always have me.

A friend of mine used to use those words as a reason for not giving to beggars. The poor will always be with you. Suggesting that poverty is inevitable. And of course there will always be inequalities in the world. The poor are always with us. But as we have been discussing in our Lent group, the extremes of wealth and poverty that we see around us are not inevitable. They should be challenged. And even if Judas's motives were wrong his question was a good one. It is about fairness. And fairness is an important issue for our society. We need to ask whether benefit cuts and tax breaks are fair. Whether the disparities in incomes and house prices are fair. But fairness doesn't seem to be very significant in the Bible. Justice is. And mercy. But fairness doesn't get much of a mention. Perhaps because life is rarely fair.

One of my favourite films is a Danish film called, *Babette's Feast*. It's a bit old now but if you get the chance to see it I do encourage you to persist with the subtitles. It's about a woman, Babette, who was a cordon bleu chef in Paris during the French Revolution. She has to flee to Denmark and is taken in by two very pious sisters, the daughters of a very Protestant minister, who live in a remote coastal region. The sisters are full of good works. Always taking fish soup to the sick and elderly and reading them passages from the Bible. But their lives are rather colourless and drab. Their fish soup, though wholesome, does not taste very good. And their emphasis on plainness and modesty leaves little room for colour and life.

Babette starts to cook for them and to prepare the food for the poor and needy. She finds herbs to improve the flavours and life starts to take on a better colour. And then one day she discovers that she has won the French lottery. She had bought a ticket before she left France but had forgotten all about it. Suddenly she is a woman of means. But instead of leaving the sisters she asks if she can spend the money on a meal for them and their community. Reluctantly they agree. And then the ingredients start to arrive. Cages of quail. A calf's head. A turtle. Crates of wine. And the sisters fear they have made a terrible mistake. This looks more like witchcraft than wholesome cooking. But they feel they cannot back out now so the meal goes ahead. And gradually, as it unfolds, the guests are transformed. They are changed from pious but sometimes loveless individuals, into children of God. People who know they are loved and can love in return. People who understand grace.

And that for me is what today's Gospel is all about. Grace. It speaks of the abundant generosity of God. Who does not give us what we deserve. Who does not always give us what is fair. But who when he does give, gives abundantly, pressed down, overflowing. He is not to be found in the joyless charity of fish soup but in the abundant extravagance of the feast or in the outpouring of costly ointment. This is the God who gave us Jesus, his son, his precious and beloved son, and allowed him to be killed. And then forgave that sin and all others.

St Paul, writing to the Philippians, understood that abundant grace of God. According to the old covenant he could stand up there with the best of them. Circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. Like the sisters in *Babette's Feast* he had previously thought of himself as having led a fairly blameless life.

But then he met Jesus who showed him that all this was rubbish. He realised that his righteousness no longer lay in fulfilling the law. In always doing what is right. His righteousness came through faith in Christ who poured out his life on the cross. Extravagantly. Sacrificially. Lovingly. We too are made righteous not because it is fair or because of anything we have done. But because of God's abundant generosity. His overwhelming love and care for us. And having been made righteous, knowing that we are loved, we are called to live abundant generous lives in return. Amen.