



Revd Ro's Reflection on
The Fifth Sunday of Lent
2022 Year C
Passion Sunday

Philippians 3.4b-14

John 12.1-8

Passiontide begins on Sunday. The gospel reading set for Passion Sunday Year A is the raising of Lazarus, today's reading is just after that momentous event. The raising of Lazarus prefigures the resurrection, but Lazarus will die eventually. Jesus' resurrection is an eternal conquering of death. We come now to the anointing of Jesus by Mary at Bethany.

The different gospels have different accounts of a similar event. In St. John's gospel, the reading we are examining, the meal is at the home of the newly raised Lazarus and the woman who pours out the perfume is Mary, his sister. In Matthew and Mark it occurs at Bethany but in the home of Simon the Leper and she is simply 'a woman'. In Luke it is again at Simon's house this time he is identified as a Pharisee and the woman as 'a sinner', usually interpreted as meaning a prostitute but it is much earlier in Jesus' ministry. That of course is why the identity of the woman is confused. It is actually why Mary Magdalene got the reputation of being a prostitute. There is absolutely no biblical evidence for this. What happened is that Pope Gregory 1 in 591 identified the 'sinful woman' in Luke as Mary Magdalene! Mary, Lazarus' sister, is a completely different woman.

Of one thing we can be sure this event took place in Bethany. John is quite specific; it is Mary the sister of Lazarus who pours the perfume over Jesus' feet. He is specific over the timing too; it takes place, 'Six days before the Passover.' That's important, the anointing by Mary takes place only a week before the Last Supper. Jesus knows what road lies ahead of him. He knows what awaits him. Just now, before going into the bear pit which is Jerusalem, before his enemies can strike he needs rest and he finds it at Bethany. Bethany is some two miles from the city. Jerusalem would have been heaving with people, there would have been nowhere available to stay. Of course Jesus retires to

Bethany. It is relatively safe, he is with his good friends and he can get some blessed peace before his ordeal.

Jesus is with Lazarus whom he has just raised from the dead. We have seen how fond Jesus is of him phrases like, 'Jesus wept' and 'he was greatly disturbed' show us that.

Very few characters in the gospels are as fully delineated as Martha and Mary. We have seen Martha and Mary before in the famous story where Martha, ever active, is scolded by Jesus because she wants Mary to lend a hand with the work. I have to confess to having a great deal of sympathy for Martha. Actually if you think about it though we all serve as best we can and in the way that suits our characters. Not everyone can preach any more than everyone can do the church accounts! Martha is doing things for Jesus in her way. She is getting him a meal, Mary is more contemplative, and she is listening to him with rapt attention. But Martha is out of line in trying to make Jesus ask Mary to 'do it her way.' Mary, sitting at Jesus' feet and listening to him with fixed attention and love is the wiser woman. Martha should learn from her as Jesus points out,

⁴¹'But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things;

⁴² there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.' (Luke 10)

We see the sisters again at the raising of Lazarus but here Martha, active once again, shows huge faith in Jesus.

²⁵'I am the resurrection and the life, those who believe in me, even though they die will live. And whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?' (John 11). That's the stunning question. Just look at Martha's response. 'You are the Christ the Son of God.'

Now in the episode from John 12 the spotlight is on her sister Mary once more. The pattern is similar to the former time Jesus spent at their home.

² 'There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him.'

Note it is Martha who serves and one wonders whether she has learned Jesus' lesson regarding her sister. Either way Jesus is at rest with friends. Then suddenly the tone changes, into this blissful domestic scene comes Mary, her action is amazing,

³ 'Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair.'

Note she anoints his feet only, in Matthew and Mark the woman anoints his head. This is not accidental Mary shows the utmost humility here.

Jesus knows Mary well, had she been a stranger to him as with the other accounts, what she does would be quite scandalous. It is surprising enough among relations and friends. She lets down her hair. Even now we talk about 'letting your hair down' meaning to be totally without any artifice, to be totally relaxed but in that culture it was an impossibly shocking thing to do. A woman's hair would be covered and tied up in modesty. It simply was not possible to untie it before others, yet she does. It would be familiar to say the least of it. Having poured out the expensive perfume on his feet she literally begins caressing them and drying them with her hair. That is such an intimate

action as to be unthinkable in public, especially to a young rabbi; and it was public, the disciples were present. We, unlike the disciples, see this as Jesus did. It is a spontaneous outpouring of love.

Because the perfume was costly Mary is indicating Jesus' great worth. As she pours the perfume, pure spikenard, on his feet we are told, 'The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.' What a beautiful line, it is symbolic too, it's as if everything was touched and purified by it. That is the atmosphere for a few seconds, love and beautiful scent. It is a moment captured in time, a transforming moment, one of worship.

The moment is wrecked by Judas' outburst. Judas is just angry; he brings ugliness into the beautiful atmosphere.

⁴ 'But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?'

Notice how John points forward to the betrayal. People would feel scorn and disgust at Judas because of his behaviour later. Judas didn't care about the poor and we are told he 'stole from the 'common purse'. Is it jealousy too I wonder? That is the besetting sin of the Pharisees et al. One wonders what is going through Judas' mind just now. For some reason he must feel let down by Jesus, maybe betrayed by him to commit the sin he was about to. Judas is already spoiling things, he has totally the wrong attitude and seems to have learned nothing even before the awful betrayal.

⁷ 'Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'

Jesus underlines his imminent death as he speaks of his burial. It prefigures the crucifixion just as surely as the raising of Lazarus prefigures the resurrection.

Mary has anointed him now –soon his execution as a common criminal will follow. This is how the passage continues,

⁹ 'When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ¹⁰So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, ¹¹since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.'

Jesus came to Bethany for peace and affection; he got it but only briefly. Judas' action sours the occasion but worse is to follow. Now the crowds follow to see the man Jesus raised and Jesus who performed the miracle. However malice is out in the open. Such an action on Jesus' part, as far as the chief priests are concerned means Jesus has to die and if possible Lazarus, the evidence of his action, will be killed too.

Passions will soon beat around Jesus on angry wings and they continue to do so until they carry him to the cross. Throughout these few days he cuts through convention and religious hypocrisy relentlessly, teaching the true word of God until he is dragged to Calvary. But from Mary to the thief on the cross he is touching and transforming lives. Mary, we have no doubt, will follow him to the end. This we know, her life is inextricably bound with her saviour. Our minds are still with Mary, with Jesus and with love. Jesus has filled her life as the perfume fills the house; he is there to fill ours too if we commit ourselves to him as Mary did.

In the reading from the epistle to the Philippians we have the words

‘If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more:’

We need to understand really what Paul is talking about. When we see the word ‘flesh’ then we tend to think of the warning, ‘beware the world, the flesh and the devil.’ That is not really the point here. Think of St. John’s words, ‘The word became flesh and dwelt among us.’ That is ‘flesh’ meaning human.

To the Jews regarding themselves as God’s chosen people, ancestry was all in all. That meant if you could trace your ancestry back to Jacob or to Abraham that was wonderful. Both Matthew and Luke’s gospel do just that giving an account of Jesus genealogy, Jesus is a son of David. To the Jews racial purity was all in all and to some that meant newly converted Gentile Christians would have to be marked in their flesh with the badge of Judaism, circumcision. Well Paul has this to say about that,

² Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh!

Some said that Gentile converts to Christianity had to adhere strictly to Jewish law and that was most important. Paul says this, look here then at what I would have boasted of when I was busy being a zealous Jew, my credentials were spot on.

‘If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised 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; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.’

I had got everything right, Jewish ancestry, I was a Pharisee, I obeyed the Law of Moses, I’d got it all. Actually though in the dust of the Damascus Road Saul was suddenly forced to see the truth, these things meant nothing to God, not now. Now he had literally seen the light, the light of Jesus met him forcefully in that instant and the sight of God blinded him literally but it taught him the truth. Outward and visible signs like circumcision, the old ways, were just not important now. Jesus Christ is the new covenant, the new way the old way gives way to the new. You do not have to follow Jewish customs to follow Christ. It comes down to this, God sent his son into the world to save the world, everyone not just the Jews. Yes Jesus brought the message to God’s people the Jews first; the tragedy was that most of them rejected it by rejecting Christ.

¹¹ ‘He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.’ (John 1)

That is the tremendous truth, ‘to all who believed in him he gave the power to become children of God,’ to all, nothing about ethnicity, nothing about gender, nothing about class. All are equal in the sight of God, ‘A light to enlighten the Gentiles and to be the glory of his people Israel.’ That’s the great truth in a nutshell.

So then it follows that the old things that had seemed to be all important, that Paul had thought was what God wanted, were no good now,

⁷ ‘Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸ More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his

sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.'

All that is central is Jesus, all that is important is the great freedoms he won for us, all that is needed is that he is at the centre of our lives and we follow him. Don't let anyone try to convince you otherwise, says Paul. Stay true to Jesus. Doing the old things like having the badge of circumcision or strict obedience to the law have been superseded by Jesus,

⁹ 'not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.'

So then says Paul if these old things are not the point, what is? The answer is Jesus Christ and the freedoms Jesus won for us. It is not just Calvary; the centre of our faith is the resurrection. Easter Sunday must follow Good Friday for our faith to have any meaning at all.

¹⁰ 'I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.'

So Paul seeks to mirror the life of Jesus, to base all he does on Jesus' way and if that means taking up his cross and following him on the path of suffering so be it, he is proud to follow his master. We know that Paul was doing just that but he prays he will share in Christ's resurrection as indeed Jesus promises to all who follow him.

The metaphor Paul uses now is a famous one; it is the one of the athlete. Games and races like this would have been very familiar to these Gentiles as indeed they are to us, the laurel wreaths they won were like our gold medals, the pinnacle of sporting achievement. Well the pinnacle of a Christian's achievement is sharing the Christ life with their whole commitment. You won't win any race unless you are in strict training, unless you give it your all. So that is how the Christian must focus, thus 'Christ is the path and Christ the prize.'

¹² 'Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.'

Life for the Christian will be tough. There will be trials, there will be setbacks and for many Christians including those Paul is addressing they might have to take up their cross to follow him through very real persecution. But they must press on regardless to breast the tape and win God's promises, the gifts Christ won on Calvary and at his resurrection.

We too have this race to run. We too need to live our lives according to the teaching of Jesus. We are part of humanity and we reach out in prayer to other people and other Christians, it's not just about us personally. Jesus came into the world to save the world. At the moment we are seeing the worst that humanity can do in the form of evil, but we see great good countering that. We see prayer throughout the world for the people of Ukraine and all who suffer, we see practical help with money or goods, we see people going to help or taking in refugees. We remember the commandment, 'Love your neighbour as yourself,' then how Jesus changed that to the new commandment, 'Love one another as I have loved you.' There is a world of difference.

'Run the straight race through God's good grace, lift up your eyes and seek his face...life with its path before us lies Christ is the path and Christ the prize.' John Samuel Bewley Monsell.

