

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 3rd April 2022
The Fifth Sunday of Lent

Collect

Gracious Father,
you gave up your Son
out of love for the world:
lead us to ponder the mysteries of his passion,
that we may know eternal peace
through the shedding of our Saviour's blood,
Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Isaiah 43:16-21

Thus says the Lord,
 who makes a way in the sea,
 a path in the mighty waters,
who brings out chariot and horse,
 army and warrior;
they lie down, they cannot rise,
 they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:
Do not remember the former things,
 or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing;
 now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
 and rivers in the desert.
The wild animals will honour me,
 the jackals and the ostriches;
for I give water in the wilderness,
 rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,
 the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise.

John 12:1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, '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.'

Sermon

Probably we can all think of things that have happened during our lives that have helped us to gain a sense of perspective.

For example, when I was quite young, and we were living as a family in the north of Scotland, my parents planned a summer holiday back to England. You can probably imagine that there was quite a lot of pressure on them to try to find time to visit all of our various family and friends because we hadn't been able to see them for some time. The holiday was well planned, stopping in various campsites as we travelled south, taking a route that allowed us to visit as many people as possible.

Unsurprisingly there were some moments of tension. Trying to get a tent dismantled, not to mention the car and trailer packed so that we could be on the road in time to make our various stops was sometimes a little stressful for my parents.

And then, on the M4, part way through our trip, we had a car accident. My dad was hospitalised – though his injuries were not too serious. And we were left without a car, unable to make any of the visits that had been so carefully planned.

As tends to happen in such circumstances, everyone rallied round. People packed meals and brought them to us at the hospital; offered us beds for the night; even loaned us a car. Most of the friends and family we had been planning to visit found a way to come and see us instead – and to help us to get back to Scotland. Everything that had created the tension and stress as we tried to make sure we got to each place at the right time seemed suddenly unimportant. The precious – and sometimes fragile – nature of life took centre stage.

This morning's gospel reading is really all about how we gain a sense of perspective. Over the weeks of Lent we have taken some time to focus on preparing ourselves to celebrate Easter. We considered those things that can get in the way of our relationship with God – the "temptations", if you like; we asked ourselves what can help us to gain a sense of direction, keeping us focused on God; we explored how following Christ can make our lives fruitful – and on Mothering Sunday last week thought especially about kindness. And now, this week, we are being invited to consider how we maintain perspective – a perspective that might help us to remain close to God's call on our lives.

The story of Mary anointing Jesus is both beautiful and poignant. What Mary does – pouring perfume over Jesus's feet, and wiping them with her hair – is an intensely intimate act. There is little doubt that it would have raised eyebrows. And yet, as John tells the story, that is not what's important. John's focus is really on the significance of what is happening. The significance of Mary's actions. And he highlights this through Judas's misunderstanding

Judas chooses to focus on the cost of the perfume – and it would undoubtedly have been extremely expensive. John points out that Judas wasn't really interested in the poor when he suggested that the perfume should have been sold and the proceeds given to them, but either way, he has missed the point. It's worth taking a moment to make sense of Jesus's response to Judas, because it helps us to understand. When Jesus says, "You always have the poor with you" he absolutely is not suggesting that we shouldn't worry about the poor. Almost the reverse, because he is referring directly to Deuteronomy 15:11, which says: "Since there will never cease to be some in need on the

earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land.'" And Jesus's listeners would have understood the reference.

The key to understanding lies in the second half of that sentence from Jesus: "You always have the poor with you, *but you do not always have me.*" The point is that Mary has understood something very profound. What she does in anointing Jesus is prepare him for what is coming. And what is coming is his death. Jesus has been talking about it for some time by now, but not everyone wants to hear. Not everyone wants to understand. Through her actions, Mary shows that she really has understood.

This reading is positioned in John's gospel shortly after the raising of Lazarus, and that is significant. John's audience has just come very close to death. So close that they have smelt it. Do you remember Martha's rather graphic comment when Jesus asks for the stone of Lazarus's tomb to be removed: 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.' I wonder whether those words came into people's minds as they smelt the perfume filling the room. The fragrant smell of anointing, which will be followed by death.

When I say that this reading is about perspective, it is the closeness of death that gives us that perspective. And we see exactly how. For Mary, the knowledge that Jesus will soon be put to death makes the cost of the perfume utterly unimportant. Her perspective is different. In some way she has sensed the significance of this man from Nazareth. She has listened to him and spent time with him. She has been loved by him and experience the transformation that can bring. She will, no doubt, continue to open her hand to the poor and needy neighbour. But here and now, she knows that there is something bigger and more important. And so she prepares Jesus for what is to come.

Judas, on the other hand, refuses to be touched. He refuses to receive Jesus's love and therefore he cannot understand its transforming power.

As we enter Passiontide, we draw closer to our mortality. On Ash Wednesday it was present, as we were marked with the sign of the cross – the sign that we come from dust and return to dust. As we move towards Holy Week, we simply cannot escape the path that Jesus will walk. And somehow that connects us with a reality that we often find hard to bear.

And yet, as Mary shows us, our perspective is changed when we understand what is really important. When we can see the significance of people in our lives; of relationships; of their fragility and yet their enduring love. And when, as Jesus shows us, we can dare to believe that in the final analysis, love will always be stronger than hate, and there is a life stretching into eternity that is stronger than death itself. And that is a perspective that can transform our lives forever.

Amen