

Sermon – Sunday 7th April 2019 – 9.30 am

Picture a collage of St. Mary's. A collage made up of all kinds of different pictures, each of which represents this place. If this is your first time here, your collage may include a picture of the church building; perhaps the gardens outside; the olive tree outside the front door; particular windows or other features that have caught your attention; the people who were at the door when you arrived; the events of the service itself. If you've been part of St. Mary's for many years, your collage is likely to include pictures of parish events; people who are no longer with us; the different groups that meet. Shaun and Martin working on the outside of the building; choir practice on Thursday night; the Christmas fair; house group; PCC meetings; toddler group; Christine or Yvonne hoovering on a Friday morning; the silver being cleaned; visits to those who can no longer make it to church. Can you see this collage, made up of so many different pictures, depicting different people and different events? Each one making up part of our life here at St. Mary's. And if you are standing in front of that collage, perhaps your eyes move from one image to another, almost as though a light is being shone on that image, and the events recalled.

There is something about our readings of the scriptures on a Sunday morning in our church services that is not dissimilar to a collage. Each Sunday we hear a story which always fits into a bigger picture. This morning's picture is perhaps particularly evocative. We know when this takes place, six days before the Passover. And we know where – in the house of Lazarus in Bethany. Lazarus has just been raised from the dead, and we know that he has two sisters, Mary and Martha, who are both present in this story. We know Judas is there, too, and probably the other disciples, though that is not specified.

This is the scene in which the events of this story unfold. While Martha serves, Mary takes costly oil and anoints Jesus's feet, wiping them with her hair. It is a sensual image – perhaps we can even smell the perfume from the oil, poured so lavishly. It is also a shocking image. Women would not have had their hair untied in front of a group of men, and neither was there physical contact between women and men.

It is Judas who takes a stand, choosing to comment on the financial waste. Jesus, we know, is concerned for the needs of the poor. How can he possibly countenance a whole year's wages being poured out over his feet? We're led to believe that Judas's motives are far from honourable, but may have some sympathy with the sentiment. Surely this is profligate waste?

To which Jesus replies that Mary should be left alone. That the oil was to be for his burial. That the poor will always be with the disciples, but Jesus himself will not.

I have suggested that this story should be seen as an image that forms part of a collage. And that is because this story really does need to be heard as part of a bigger overarching narrative. The narrative, ultimately, of the entire gospel. Once we do that, its meaning begins to become clearer. And whoever wrote John's gospel makes some of those connections for us. We are reminded that the house is that of Lazarus, who was raised from the dead – just as, when Mary was introduced in the story of the raising of Lazarus, John reminded his readers that she was the one who would anoint Jesus. Connections are important. Meaning is contained within those connections.

Once we see the story in its context, we can understand the responses better. There are a number of reasons for anointing. The term Messiah literally translated means the Lord's anointed; Kings were

anointed to show that their authority came from God. The scene in today's reading takes place just before Jesus enters Jerusalem on the donkey, that sign of his kingship, albeit a very different kind of kingship than the world recognised. And of course bodies were anointed for burial. Given the proximity of Jesus's death, this story is rich in imagery that helps us to understand why Jesus wanted Mary to be left alone to carry out this important ritual act. You will have noticed, too, that it was Jesus's feet that Mary anointed, which may well remind you of Jesus washing his disciples' feet at the last supper – the Passover supper, which the story tells us is only six days away.

If we turn to Judas, it is easy for us to question his motivations, not least because John always encourages us to do just that. We know that his betrayal is only days away, and we are told, too, that he is a thief. That he should claim to care for the poor seems incongruous to say the least. But – and this is important – we also need to remember that our collage must surely be full of images of Jesus spending time with the poor; of Jesus teaching that those who are first will be last, and those who are last will be first. Jesus's particular care for the poor throughout his life and ministry is beyond question, and his words about the poor must be heard in this context. When he says that the poor will always be with the disciples, it simply cannot be a suggestion that they should therefore not be cared for and that no attempts should be made to eradicate poverty. Because everything in Jesus's life and teaching suggests exactly the opposite. The comment was simply to highlight the fact that he would not be around for much longer.

One scholar has even suggested that we may be translating the Greek incorrectly. For grammar gurus among you, in ancient Greek the present indicative form of a verb can sometimes match the present imperative. So a better translation could be to hear a command, "keep the poor with you always." Isn't that a wonderful idea, that Jesus might have been telling his disciples that he was going away, but that the best way to keep his memory close would be to follow his example and spend time with the poor.

I hope you can see that we get a richer understanding of today's gospel reading by seeing it as part of a bigger story. So now let's return to our collage of St. Mary's. Perhaps to the picture of Shaun and Martin clearing the gutters. Now they're definitely conscientious, hard-working chaps, but I'd like to hazard a guess that they could find other things to do with their lives than climbing ladders around St. Mary's. Just as Christine and Yvonne, I'm sure, don't need to Hoover the church carpets to fill their days. And that's where it's important to see those pictures in the context of the whole collage. All of these various things that people are involved in at St. Mary's are connected. I don't know what you would place at the centre of the collage – it may be an image of the church itself; it may be a picture of a group of people who matter most to you – those who are already here, or those we have yet to meet; or it may be a representation of God. What connects everything that is done here at St. Mary's is our belief that we are here to share God's love in this community. We do that in all kinds of ways, each of which forms an image in our collage. When people are climbing ladders to clear the gutters, or making sure the church is clean, they are doing so because we couldn't fulfil our purpose without well-maintained buildings. Our choir and music group take the time to rehearse weekly because our worship gives glory to God when it is accompanied by beautiful music.

An annual meeting is a good time to look carefully at the collage of St. Mary's. To give thanks for those individuals who form part of any one of those smaller pictures. And most of all to take time to remember the bigger picture. To see everything we do in the context of a bigger story that gives glory to God and shares the love that we know God has for each one of us with everyone we meet.

Amen