

Lent 5 - Passion Sunday
3rd April 2022
Sermon on John 12:1-8
By the Rev. Jackie Bullen

There is a sense of safety and security that we feel when we are among friends, real friends. That sense of being able to be ourselves. To relax and speak freely.

This passage of scripture speaks of the time after the raising of Lazarus, a miracle that gave the Pharisees and chief priests the final evidence they needed that Jesus was a threat who must be dealt with, and Jesus and his disciples withdrew to Ephraim, in the wild hill country of Judea.

As his passion approaches, Jesus removes himself from public view, and from the clamour of expectation and threat that surrounds him.

Liturgically, we reflect this in the veiling of images.

Already in Lent the liturgy is simplified; vestments are plainer; there are no decorations in church.

Like our Lenten fasting, this is a way of shaping and orienting our desires: we want what we cannot see – the presence of God with us and the companionship of the saints.

Jerusalem is not a safe place for Jesus. Among the pilgrims who will throng the streets for the Passover will be spies as well as supporters; Jesus will be pulled this way and that by the curious, the calculating, and those looking to trap him.

But Jesus will not avoid it. As the hour of his death approaches – and in John's Gospel this is inseparable from the hour of his glory – Jesus and his disciples move again, to Bethany, a couple of miles outside Jerusalem, where Mary, Martha and Lazarus live.

In the midst of all the plotting and danger, this is a homely scene. Jesus is with people he loves, and who love him.

For now, the pressure of expectation, the weight of human need, the scheming of the authorities is outside.

Inside there is human warmth and love, food and wine, the companionship of friends.

But this is not a moment of escape, a hiatus in the story before the narrative moves on.

Already in the room is a reminder of death: Lazarus, hauled out of the tomb and raised to life, is learning how to live in human flesh again, how to be at home once more in this world.

Inside the room too is Judas, who will become the betrayer.

Around the table, Jesus' disciples can snatch a few brief hours of relaxation. Here they don't need to keep looking over their shoulders, worrying about being arrested. There is respite too from the constant questioning of the crowds and the religious leaders about who Jesus is.

As John's Gospel tells it, the disciples have seen Jesus' glory in the signs he has performed.

They have followed him as their teacher and acclaimed him as the Messiah promised in the law and the prophets.

But as the following days will show, they are not ready, have not understood, what sort of Messiah Jesus is.

It is Mary who understands. Mary who, without words, acclaimes Jesus as the anointed one, and loves him enough to let him go.

Martha and Mary have just lost and regained their brother.

Now Mary prepares to lose her friend and her Lord, not knowing yet that on the third day he too will be raised from the dead.

So as Jesus is reclining at table Mary takes a pound of costly perfume – an enormous amount: if Judas's valuation is to be believed, it's worth almost a year's wages for a labourer.

Like Jesus' turning of water into wine at Cana, this is a sign of abundance, of sheer generosity. Mary is pouring out not just the perfume, but her love for Jesus.

And this anointing helps us answer the question so many have been asking throughout the Gospel: who is Jesus?

John tells us that Mary anointed Jesus six days before the Passover. That puts it on the eve of Palm Sunday, the day Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey and was acclaimed by the crowds as King.

Here, then, in accordance with ancient Jewish practice, is Jesus' anointing as King.

But this is no straightforward anointing, for this is no ordinary king.

In the first place, Mary anoints Jesus' feet, not his head, as would be traditional. Hers is a gesture of humility and of loving reverence.

And it is no accident that the word John uses to describe Mary wiping Jesus' feet is the same word he uses when Jesus washes the disciples' feet at the Last Supper.

This is a King who will humble himself, who comes among his people as one who serves, not as one who lords it over them.

Jesus' glory and majesty will be revealed: he is the Messiah, literally, the Anointed One, for whom Israel has longed.

But his glory won't be revealed through political power or military force, as so many expected, but through the cross. And this brings into focus the second aspect of Mary's anointing of Jesus.

By Jewish custom, bodies were anointed before burial, so this is an anticipation of Jesus' death.

But the anointing for burial and the anointing as King belong together: Jesus' majesty can't be revealed apart from his death.

There is no way round the darkness of human suffering, no escape from the violence and torment of the cross.

The crowds will see this as failure and the religious authorities as heresy.

But standing the other side of Easter, it holds out the promise that there is absolutely nothing that can separate us from God.

But that promise is yet to be realised: to live Christ's life we must first live his death, and we are now embarked on that journey with Christ to the cross.

And this servant King who drew a response of such abundant love from Mary will require us to make a response too.

When we come to Holy Week, we will see things unfold, we will be confronted with betrayal and denial and cowardice – the disciples' and our own.

And there is space and encouragement in the liturgies to recognise that and name it truthfully.

But here, at the start of Passiontide, I wonder whether we might learn from Mary and begin not with a focus on our own failings, but with the offering of our love.

And if, in comparison with Mary's abundant love, ours feels a bit paltry or a bit contained (I know mine often does!), we must simply offer what we have.

Our love for God is increased as we offer it to him.

So take some time, during this first week of Passiontide, to let Jesus into our house, our home and give thanks for what he has done for us, for what he means to us.

And pray for the grace, like Mary, to love him enough to let him go on his way to the cross.

For as he does, as we journey with him during this week and then on to Holy Week, we see his offering of the gift beyond price: his fragrant offering to God – his life and his love, poured out for us.