

On this 5th Sunday in Lent, that in earlier years was known as Passion Sunday, we have read as our Gospel reading that lovely passage from St John, giving us the anointing of Jesus in Bethany. But before we go to the passage itself, let us take a look at the wider setting of the story. The Gospel writers tell their story in two ways; first in the individual passages themselves and secondly in the order in which they group their material.

This passage is placed between two crucial events in the ministry of Jesus as it moves towards the climax of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus. The first is the raising of Lazarus. John tells us that the religious authorities, on seeing the response of the crowd to this, decide the time has finally come when they will have to make a move against him before he causes trouble and brings the wrath of the Roman authorities down on their heads. In their meeting, Caiaphas declares,

‘it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.’ *John 11:50*

The second event is the Triumphal entry into the city of Jerusalem – John’s account is lower key than that given by the other Gospel writers.

Between these two events John inserts this moment of calm into the story. We are in Bethany, where Lazarus had been raised from the dead. Jesus is guest of honour at a meal. Lazarus is there as are his two sisters; Martha, the archetypal hostess, is there serving the meal. Then we are told that Mary, quite spontaneously takes a large jar of expensive perfume and proceeds to lavishly anoint Jesus’ feet, wiping them with her hair – the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

There is something outrageous in this, the gesture itself, the very cost of the perfume, the fragrance everywhere. Maybe, secretly, we are saying ‘You know Judas may have had a point.’ There was an exuberance, an extravagance to all of this. Those words carry with them a sense of nothing held back. I just want to stay with those words, exuberance, extravagance as we reflect on the wider vocation of Jesus as we draw close to Holy Week and Easter.

The extravagance of the Incarnation, God coming among us in the person of Jesus. Again and again I find myself returning to Paul’s words as he writes to the Philippians:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross. *Phil 2:5ff*

He emptied himself, literally stripped himself of all rank. He became like us in every way. He knew what it was like to share our humanity; what it was like to laugh, to cry, to know friendship, hostility, loneliness, danger, death. There is an extravagance, an exuberance here in which nothing is held back.

Paul says to his readers ‘Let the same mind be in you’. The word Paul uses here, *φρονεῖτε*, has its root in a word that means literally ‘diaphragm, midriff’ and then is applied to the mind, the intellect. I get a sense, ‘Have this same

gut-feeling within you.’ This same extravagance of mind, an openness of heart as we respond to the love of God in Christ.

To go back to our Gospel reading, the fragrance of the perfume that Mary poured on Jesus’ feet, filling the whole house; there was no part of that house, no corner, no cupboard left untouched by that fragrance. May our response to Christ’s self-emptying, self-abandoning love have something of that all-pervading nature of Mary’s perfume, spreading into every nook and cranny of our lives.

Jesus called his disciples to an expansive response. Luke tells us of him telling the disciples:

Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you.” *Luke 6:37*

It is said of love that if we seek to hold onto it, we lose it. If we share it we get so much more back in return. The fragrance spreading out from us into the world about us. There is something here of that same exuberance, extravagance in those words as he continues:

A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

Love given in response to love; love overflowing from my life into the world about me. We are about to enter into the mystery of Good Friday and Easter, the triumph of life over death, light over darkness. May we who have been touched by the love of God in Christ be ones in whom and through whom that love, that light, that fragrance is manifest in the world about us.