

The Fifth Sunday in Lent, Passion Sunday

Isaiah 43:16-21

Psalm 126

Philippians 3:4b-14

John 12:1-8

St. Thomas's Anglican Church

Toronto, ON

+In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

Everything in the Gospel today was wrong, from every angle of that day and age. While at dinner, Mary, one of Jesus' hosts, does what is appropriate and washes the feet of her guest. Instead of water though, she uses a perfume made of nard, a costly ointment worth 300 denarii, a year's wages. You don't waste something like that, so such a perfume was used to prepare bodies for burial. Even more scandalous, Mary was wiping Jesus' feet with her hair. This was a highly intimate and inappropriate thing for a woman to do to a man not her husband. This causes Judas to protest, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?"

His concern, though disingenuous, is realistic and understandable in such situation. Mary should cover up; the nard should be put to better use. Jesus replies "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial."

Judas' comment is reasonable though. We live in a world where there is such abundance and extravagance, the vast majority of the world's wealth and resources are owned by a handful of people. On average 14 million people die each year due to starvation, lack of access to clean drinking water, or diseases that are preventable due to vaccination. These are deaths that our world could stop right now but chooses not.

Look at churches, look at ourselves, how much do we spend every year on music, candles, incense, and all the other aspects that goes into our worship? All this while nearly 8,000 people in Toronto are homeless (which likely is a heavy underestimation), and many more struggle to make ends meet. Shouldn't we take all that money and give it to the poor? Jesus' message is to "bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free!" What better way is there to embrace Jesus' message of social justice than to "give all that we have to the poor, to take up our crosses, and follow him"? Judas' comment therefore should be a damning indictment of what we do. But of course, as always, there is more to it than that.

Many people gravitate to Jesus' moral and ethical teaching regarding the poor. His message is radical and remains relevant even two thousand years later. There is sometimes a desire to decouple Jesus' moral and ethical teachings from the supernatural and metaphysical aspects of Jesus as Messiah. Things like the miracles or resurrection are too "religious" in the face of a good message, so for some it is better to not deal with all those supernatural things. The truth is

that Jesus was indeed a moral and ethical teacher who proclaims and demands radical solidarity with the poor, but he is also much more than that.

The nard perfume Mary used was rare and expensive in Jesus' time. Nard oil comes from the spikenard plant, which originated in the Himalayas, but grew in different parts of the ancient world and was often made into perfume. Such perfumes were often used to prepare a body for burial. When Mary opens the container of nard, she fills her home with the smell of death. Indeed, "perfume and death have been on intimate terms for millennia...each drop [means the death a field of flowers]" just to create a beautiful scent. So much life is given for death and death is what awaits all life in this world. This is why Jesus came. All of Jesus' teachings about sin and redemption, love and forgiveness, poverty and justice, can only be truly and properly understood through Jesus' death. Jesus came to die so that we might have life more abundantly. Mary anoints Jesus as she would a corpse, he is marked for death. His own death though brings forth beauty in our world much like perfume brings beauty.

I said at the beginning of Lent that we have a way of becoming our own worst adversaries. We in turn also have a way of making ourselves into the hero of our own personal stories. Do we see ourselves as righteous and condemn the great evils of the world? Are we pious? Devout? Do we feign a false humility about ourselves that hides our own pride from other or even ourselves? We may echo what Saint Paul says about himself, albeit without his own sense of irony, "If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more."

We often have great pride, but that pride in the end is a shield to hide our own shortcomings, sorrows, and weaknesses. We can easily become like Judas, decrying something when we ourselves are hypocrites hiding behind our own pride and transgressions while justifying our own righteousness. In the end, there is only one who is perfect, and that is God alone. All our pride and vainglory are nothing in comparison.

Jesus in all his perfection, assumed our imperfect humanity. He identifies with and is among the poor, the destitute, the dispossessed, and the oppressed, but he ultimately shares in the one thing that all humanity shares in, death. All our wealth and possessions and all that we are becomes meaningless in the face of our own mortality. We can't bring any of that with us beyond the grave! Indeed, there will come a point in the future where someone will say your name for the last time, and we will be forgotten. And yet God deigned to share in our own mortality and death because that dark fate and consequence of sin had the potential to bring life more abundantly and more beautifully than before. His death transforms death itself by paving the way to resurrection and new life. This is what Jesus' love and passion looks like.

Though we all share a common mortality, the reality is that not all people die equally. Some die surrounded by loved ones with grandiose funerals, others die alone and forgotten. The average funeral in Canada costs between \$10,000-\$20,000; for some that is a year's wage. Many cannot afford that. Jesus in death still identifies with that poor by dying an inglorious death. He is nailed to a cross and buried out of sight and out of mind, destined to be alone, unremarked, and forgotten. Though Jesus glorifies the tomb as the source of life for all, it is by sharing in the death of the poor that Jesus transforms death for all. Mary's anointing of Jesus with perfume makes his death beautiful, and our worship in the beauty of holiness does the same.

Jesus says, “you always have the poor with you,” but this is not a cynical remark to cease caring for the poor. Rather, it is the duty to share with the poor the beauty that Mary shared with Jesus during his brief time on Earth. All that we have here, the beauty of holiness, belongs to the poor. Yes, we must provide for the physical needs of the poor, but people have spiritual needs that the church must provide for. In Jesus, the moral and ethical teaching about justice and poverty are linked to his death and resurrection. One cannot exist without the other, if we are to understand the command to love thy neighbour as thyself, we have to remember Jesus’ what Jesus said “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” Only by recognizing how deeply Jesus loves us by dying for us can we understand the core of his ethical teaching and live it out in the world.

Traditionally, the fifth Sunday in Lent was referred to as Passion Sunday and the beginning of Passiontide. Crosses and other images are veiled symbolizing the church putting on clothes of mourning for the death of Jesus. In this deep part of Lent, Jesus is marked and anointed for death, and every step closer to Jerusalem is a step towards his death and passion. We fast and pray during Lent so that we can journey with him to the end at the foot of the cross, where all that we are and all that we have done is hung upon it. And from that death comes forth resurrection and beauty and life for the poor, oppressed, dispossessed, and for all humanity.

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