

Offering ourselves

Revd Ken Batterham
28 March 2004, Fifth Sunday in Lent

Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126; Philippians 3:3-14; John 12:1-8

Forgetting what is behind me, and reaching out for that which lies ahead, I press toward the goal to win the prize which is God's call to the life above in Christ Jesus.

Over the past couple of weeks we have been on holidays in the most wonderful place in the world. I'm not allowed to mention it by name because every time I do the family tells me that I am responsible for a sudden influx of people. The great thing about this particular place is that we are little known except, of course when we go to church anywhere in the district as we did last Sunday. It's like 'Hello what are you doing down here' or 'Hello I know you from Synod' and I have to apologize profusely to Elizabeth. Anglican churches are so welcoming but I have to say that there is no such thing as anonymity for a clergy person or their family.

Anyway, over the past two weeks, in between playing lots of golf, getting as much time in the surf as I possibly could and being whipped on the tennis court by Elizabeth on more than one occasion I have been reading. These things and lots of walking more than fill our time in our semi nomadic life that we have led over the past two years since Elizabeth successfully retired and as she says I totally failed in my attempts to retire.

A few weeks ago we visited our daughter, son in law and grandson in Sydney. During the course of the visit I purloined my son in law's copy of '5 Red Herrings' by Dorothy L Sayers and it has formed my main reading material over the past 2 weeks. Sayers was a great mystery writer in the middle part of the 20th century. To call her a mystery writer is to do her a great injustice. Her famous play 'A Man Born to be King' was probably the most enlightened study of the life of Jesus of her time. I had not read any of her books before this and I found it absorbing. I think that my son in law had better be careful during our next visit otherwise I shall more than likely abscond with his whole collection.

I won't give away the plot but in '5 Red Herrings' there are 6 characters who all have strong motives for doing away with the victim and the great detective Lord Peter Wimsey who just happens to be on the spot at the time is called upon to work out which of the 6 relatively plausible alibis is the truth and which is fiction. It is a wonderful read for lots of reasons. Sayers' use of language is superb. The plot is intricate to the extent that the reader wonders how she could possibly have developed her ideas and woven them together in a way that makes such a good story. Modern day crime writing is so often slap dash with loose ends often making the story unconvincing with the effect that it is often not difficult to work out who dunnit long before the plot is fully developed.

There is another important level on which this book works well and that is that from very early on we are drawn into the shoes of Lord Peter Wimsey but on a much broader scale. For his story is our story. This is not a simply detective mystery in which the famous detective tries to work out who dunnit. This is a metaphor for life. For we are all called upon to be detectives in the search for truth in life. Our task is to lay out all the stories of life before us and using all the evidence we can muster to work out which are true and lead to life and which are fiction.

Our starting point on this wonderful investigative enterprise is always the Gospel of Jesus Christ particularly as it is revealed to us week by week in our eucharistic liturgy for in the Gospels are the clues we need in our search for truth. I always admire the manner in which the compilers of our lectionary, which sets our readings for the Sunday services and for all of

services for that matter, [do so] in an ordered and comprehensive manner. Our church year operates in a three year cycle. Each of the 3 Synoptic Gospels Matthew Mark and Luke form the basis of the Gospel readings for the Sundays of each of the three years with St John's Gospel woven in at important times. There are very imaginative names for each of the years of the three year cycle. They are called years A, B and C and this is year C when Luke's gospel is the main Gospel for the Sunday services.

I think that every Sunday Gospel reading, indeed all of the readings, but especially the Gospel is packed full of clues in the search for the truth in life. Today's Gospel reading is no exception. There is a huge change that has happened today. I wonder if you noticed it. All of the readings for the Gospel for Lent have come from St Luke's gospel. Now suddenly, as we get to the serious end of the season today we suddenly change. This is the last Sunday in Lent, our time of preparation for Holy Week, Good Friday and Easter is almost over. Next Sunday is Palm Sunday when we celebrate the arrival of Jesus in Jerusalem and the climax of the Story.

So on this climatic and mystical day we suddenly change to John's Gospel. Someone once said that if you want to read a biography of Jesus read Luke's Gospel but if you want a mystical theology of Jesus read John's Gospel. I think that this is true but I also think that John's Gospel is wonderful because it works on so many different levels. It is, for example, both a history of Jesus' life and ministry and a history of the Johannine Community from which it emerged. So there is some sorting out to be done by us. Our task in this case is to sort out what the Gospels have to tell us about the truth. We need to sort out, not so much truth from fiction but rather our task is to work out, in the case of John's Gospel what is the truth for us and what the Gospel writers included in their stories which addressed other issues such as the story about the community.

Even this little episode which forms our Gospel for today has much to say about truth but we need to do a little detective work to discover what it is. The first thing that we can say about this story of the anointing of Jesus is that an event which was similar to this could well have happened. The evidence that we have for suggesting this is that there are two other references to the event, one in Matthew's Gospel and the other in Luke. The episode in both of these Gospels is quite different from the story as we have it in John. In John the characters are clearly identified as Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus and the disgruntled and later discredited disciple Judas. In Luke the story is used to draw out a detailed teaching by Jesus. The woman is not named and the dissenters are identified as Pharisees. In Matthew the story ends with the memorable statement that wherever the Gospel is proclaimed what she has done will be proclaimed in memory of her. The woman is not identified in this story and the dissenters are the disciples collectively. In Matthew and John the central issue is the cost of the ointment and opportunity foregone to support the poor. In Luke the issue is the woman's sinful nature and Jesus identification with her.

In our search for the truth, the life giving truth, let us lay aside the issues in the story that really don't matter. These issues are not fictitious, I hasten to add. They are very important to the context of the gospels in which they are proclaimed. The first of these issues is who were the characters who were involved in the story. I think that who the characters were really doesn't matter. The important thing is that Jesus was the central character, to whom a great and mystical service was performed by in my view an unidentified woman and that some people who were looking on who were known to Jesus were very critical of her actions [(Of course the identity of the characters does matter in the beautiful Sydney Carter song which is based on today's Gospel which Linda will sing for us shortly)] It also doesn't matter much what exactly happened. Although there is a fair degree of agreement between the Gospel

writers about the story there is no way that we can really be certain of what happened. So I don't think that there is any need for us to become too literalist about this story. In my view it is a beautiful story which informs us about some ultimate truths and that is all that needs to be said.

What are these truths? Well there are three that I want to mention. There are probably many more that we could probably draw out but I hope that you see that as part of your task in reflecting upon the Gospel during the coming week.

The first truth that this story illustrates is the preeminent position of women among the follower of Jesus and among the members of the early church. In the gospels it is always that the women get it right and the men are left floundering in the background. St Mark's Gospel is in one sense the story of the desertion of Jesus first by the wider world, then by his male followers, then by his closest male associates. Even though the final picture of the gospel is one of the women running away in fear they are the ones who stay with Jesus to the end. They, both as followers of Jesus and as members of the early church, get it right and that is the way it is to this very day. And we won't be in touch with the truth in the world and in the church until the rightful place of women at all levels of leadership is recognised and acted upon. How it can possibly be that we have controversy in the Australian Church about women as bishops in the 21st Century is utterly beyond me.

Secondly, this woman I suspect as a representative of many of the woman followers of Jesus got it as opposed to all of the men in the stories who failed utterly to get it. Virtually from the outset Jesus had clearly predicted that his journey, his ministry, was a journey towards the cross. In John's version and in Matthew's version this story sits at the very cusp of the betrayal and Crucifixion of Jesus. This is a climatic story. It is the most graphic depictions in all literature of one persons understanding and identification with what is about to happen to another. In the anointing of Jesus by this unidentified woman she acts out in very clear terms what is about to happen. She and those like her, knows that Jesus will die soon. And her detractors whoever they may be just don't get it. The truth is that we won't get it until we too are prepared to take up our cross and follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ.

Finally, we don't know precisely what this woman did but whatever she did this woman offered herself In his wonderful book *Golf and the Spirit*, M Scott Peck says that the secret to successful golf is to practice kenosis. He defines kenosis as the process of the self letting go of self. He says 'In doing battle on the golf course against my own personality against my ego I am attempting to practice kenosis: getting myself out of my own way. He continues 'It is what spiritual growth is all about'. Here is the central truth of our gospel story. We find life when we give ourselves when we put self aside and offer ourselves to God. That wonderful prayer of dismissal at the end of the Eucharist the prayer of self giving has lost some of its significance but it is so important in our search for truth our search for life. 'Father, we offer ourselves to you as a living sacrifice'. As we say these words Sunday by Sunday we follow in the footsteps of this unidentified woman who strove forward to win the prize the prize the prize of life, by offering herself unconditionally to God in Jesus Christ. Amen.