

The anointing at Bethany: God's new thing

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
Fifth Sunday in Lent—13 March 2016
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John 12.1-8; Isaiah 43.16-21

Introduction

The party at the house of Mary, Martha and Lazarus is one bubbling over with all the emotions and tension of a family party. After all, Lazarus has been restored to them and is sitting at the table. That has to be a surprise and a joy.

Six days before the Passover, Jesus comes from his wilderness retreat to Bethany, the town of Lazarus, to share a meal with the family. It is a provocative move, because it was the raising of Lazarus that created the crisis and led to the plan to kill Jesus. Lazarus is there and Lazarus is the sign of the glory of God and the glory of the Son of Man (11.4). He is therefore an affront to Jesus' enemies—so much of an affront that they want to kill Lazarus as well (9-11).

The story of the anointing of Jesus makes us aware that we are rapidly approaching 'the end.' Thus Jesus returned to the family table as a fugitive. His enemies are openly pursuing him and the end they want is judicial death. The authorities have taken the decision to arrest Jesus and have put about that they will happily accept information from anyone regarding his whereabouts. Jesus now has a formal death threat over him and this will be the last Sabbath he will celebrate with his friends. It is the Saturday before the Passover and events now start to move rapidly towards the end.

The first point of tension comes as Mary picks up a pound of costly nard, pours it over Jesus' feet and then wipes his feet with her hair. The whole house knew what was going on, for the smell permeated every room.

Mary and the Perfume

Let's explore this action a little. It was undoubtedly an extravagant act. That is what the pervasiveness of the fragrance indicates. Judas's comment on the price makes that clear, too. It's about a year's salary for a labourer. Its quality and quantity are remarked on.

This is not a mere token sprinkle of Chanel No. 5. We need to keep this extravagance in mind. Without doubt it is related to Jesus' raising of Lazarus back to this life, returning him to this family. It's an expression of thanksgiving, of honour and of praise. She is saying to all who watch: "I am prepared to spend all this on this person because of what this person has done. I will honour this person with all that I have." It's an intense act of love and devotion.

It was also an intense emotional point in time, and the lingering fragrance drew the onlookers into the moment. It is intensely emotional because it is deeply personal. This is not duty at work. This is not obedience to a law. Thus it demands the onlookers respond to it. She gives herself boldly in love to Jesus just as he will give himself boldly in love for the world in six days' time.

I suspect some may well have responded with embarrassment or confusion. You know what it's like when someone does something extravagant, over the top, and in public to boot. But the only two responses recorded are those of Judas and Jesus.

The response of Judas

The second point of tension is Judas' response. He protests Mary's extravagance. It is a waste. Judas's pragmatism brings Mary's insight, discernment, and love down to earth with a thud. Judas measures everything by utility; is it useful. Nothing else matters.

On the surface it is the argument of a party pooper—an unsmiling, grim, proto-economic rationalist. The moment does not touch him emotionally or symbolically; he cannot read it or discern any sign of God. He has a higher motive than adoration and love—he has the poor.

That might sound a reasonable argument, except that we are let into a little secret. Judas doesn't really care for the poor at all. He is much more interested in his own pocket and presumably his own reputation.

We know a lot about people who use others to less fortunate than themselves to gain an advantage. We know about hypocrisy; it surrounds us all the time. We know that things are not always what they seem. We know that people can hide behind fine words to cover over hidden agendas. We know that people can use the cover of religion for every evil purpose under the sun.

So how does Jesus respond to the tensions between Judas and Mary?

Jesus' response to Mary

He accepts Mary's love and devotion. He will suffer no attack on her. There are several reasons for that.

She is offering praise for the life of God that is available in Jesus. She knows that truth in the restoration of Lazarus to life. She is celebrating the fullness of life that Jesus brings. We must always place this in the context of the raising of Lazarus.

"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." 11.25

This event points forward to Jesus' own resurrection.

She celebrates his burial, a strange thing to celebrate at a party, but it must have been obvious to all that the end was upon them. His death must precede the ultimate gift of life. Burial is the sign of the reality of death.

She also anticipates Jesus' action of humble service in foot washing, which happens later in this same week. She serves Jesus just as he will serve others. The connecting force is love. In Mary, we are given a picture of the fullness of the life of discipleship. Her act demonstrates the love that is the hallmark of discipleship in this gospel. It also highlights the other pole of discipleship in John; the recognition of who Jesus is.

Discipleship is defined by acts of love and by recognition of Jesus. And it is in this Gospel that a woman, Mary, is the first to embody the love and devotion required of all disciples. Jesus' disciples are people, like Mary, whom Jesus loves and who love him and live out that life of love. Discipleship is intensely personal and relational.

Jesus' response to Judas

Hence the rebuke, implied and otherwise, to Judas. Judas's response is institutional, covering his hypocrisy, and perhaps driven by ideology.

Judas does not respond to Jesus with love. The raising of Lazarus and the gift of life mean nothing to him. Thus the coming hour of Jesus' death means even less to him. He will not

rejoice in the new thing Jesus is doing; greed will dominate his life instead. He disdains Mary's emotion, her deep commitment and public display of love, and he despises the Jesus who accepts it. But there is a hidden critique here, too. Judas is called a thief: in the story of the Good Shepherd, the thief is the one who threatens the flock, who would take it away and use it for his own advantage. Judas is not just a thief because he stole money. He represents all thieves who would use the flock of God for their own advantage. They would woo it away from the love of Jesus and his people using fine words and lofty sentiments. At heart they are self-centred disdainers of all that Jesus and Mary stand for. Judas's response is the destruction of the people of God. The poor are not served by Judas. Judas and his ilk use the poor for their own benefit.

In contrast, Mary's action is life. It's life because Mary taps the source of love that will set the poor free. The Judases of this world will bind the poor to themselves. The Marys do not need to need the poor. They do not feed off their need. They can set them free.

Judas cannot discern what God is doing. Remember that beautiful reading from Isaiah this morning? God is a god of new things:

"I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" (19)

This is a key theme of Lent and Easter. God is not bound by the past. God is bound neither by natural obstacles such as the sea or raging waters, nor by human military or political power (16-17). The nations are impotent before God. And Babylon, the place of exile, of pain, shame and captivity, is no match for his power (14-15). The prophet reminds the people, terrified and cowed in Babylon, that God once brought a rabble out of Egypt in the face of the greatest military power of the day.

In the fugitive Jesus, sentenced to death before his trial, God brings the world light and life. This is God's new thing. Mary discerns it. Judas does not.

Conclusion

It is a bit stark, this choice of response that is put before us.

How do we respond to Jesus?

Has this Lent helped us respond like Mary?

Have we become disciples who know who Jesus is and what his life set free among us means?

Are we Mary or Judas?

Where has your journey through Lent taken you so far?