

Scandalous!

Sermon for the 5th Sunday in Lent, Year C, 7 April 2019
St Philip's Church, O'Connor, ACT, Australia
Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126; Philippians 3: 3-14; John 12: 1-8

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

+In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Friends, the scene in today's Gospel is more than a little scandalous. There's the plain eroticism of it, with a young woman untying her long hair and wiping the Lord's feet. And there's the total financial irresponsibility of it, the woman using a whole pound of top-of-the-range perfume, over three hundred denarii worth, and of course a denarius was a day's pay for a labourer, so this is nearly a year's wages, gone in one grand gesture of love and devotion, gone in one grand gesture which says to Jesus 'you mean everything to me', which says to Jesus that what he is and what he brings is priceless, of surpassing worth, so that nothing else comes close.

But Judas doesn't like it; he doesn't like it at all! It's too sexy, it's too daring, it's too reckless, it's too unbalanced for his tastes. He

says the money's wasted, that it should have gone to the poor. Can't you just hear him, and people like him, saying this? But he doesn't really care about the poor, does he—people like Judas are just as quick to criticise spending on the poor, aren't they, or on aboriginal causes, or on foreign aid: 'we've got problems of our own, why give it to them'? This is a voice we hear again and again in Australia today, and the wrong sort of politician panders to it. In reality it's a voice saying 'give it all to me', which is what Judas is really saying, according to today's Gospel—because he's a thief, because he's greedy, because he wants it all for himself, and he hates people who give it away because it shows up how mean he is. In other words, he's small minded, spiritually puny, turned-in on himself, like a lot of people, who couldn't even begin to understand the woman in today's Gospel and her grand gesture.

But we understand her I think. In the Eucharist especially we have a sign and seal of this generosity, so that here today you and I are invited to see just how generous God is with us, if we let ourselves have eyes to see it. The woman in the Gospel responds in a really over-the-top way with her perfume, and so we respond, despite Judas and all his kind who can't understand. We respond by coming to Church every Sunday, to give thanks, and to show

solidarity week by week with the Christian brothers and sisters God has given to us.

Let me say a word about two other people who have a lot in common with us. We meet them in our other readings today. One is the prophet in exile in Babylon 2500 years ago whose words we have in the Isaiah reading this morning. He's full of lavish praise for God at a time when I'm sure the sceptics were out in force, sceptics like Judas, life deniers. The prophet tells his exiled people, his lost people, his rightly doubting people, that not only will things be like they were in the good old days, in the days when God brought the ancestors out of slavery in Egypt, but they'll be better, so much better that people won't even tell the old stories any more, because they'll have new and better stories to tell: "Do not remember the former things", Isaiah tells them, speaking for God, "or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing: now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" Writing like Isaiah does here is a bold strategy to lift the spirits, to lift the sights of downcast, defeated people. And his words help us, too, which is one reason why we worship together week by week, to hear stories like this, and to become part of them, to see a grand vision in our Eucharist, with angels and archangels and all the company

of heaven, and to know ourselves as part of that grand vision, and to have our imaginations fired by it—fired so we become bolder, livelier, more generous, and God knows the world needs a bold, lively, generous community to show it how to get beyond the scepticism of Judas, beyond his negativity, beyond his world weary cynicism. And this is God’s vocation for us as God’s Church, nothing less than this, nothing less exciting, nothing less demanding.

The other person I’ll mention is St Paul, who gives us our second reading today. He knows that God has been good to him, that in Jesus Christ, somehow, his life has started again in a new and positive way, and so he says he counts everything as loss, not looking back to what he was before but looking forward to what God has let him become since he’s found Jesus Christ.

Now, Judas: he resists this impulse, doesn’t he? He refuses to claim the freedom, he refuses to claim the imaginative inheritance that Jesus’ friends know. But Paul challenges us, and all the other friends of Jesus, not to be like Judas, but to be like Paul himself, confident that God has given our lives a new start, and strive to grab hold of that new start—not tied to our past, but freed by God for our future.

For Paul, for the woman with the expensive perfume, for the prophet in exile, for me and for you, there's a great goodness, a great hope, a great joy to be celebrated. Judas can't see it, and he resists, but we can see it—in the vision we celebrate here in Church today—and we want to be part of it. With all the eagerness of the woman in the Gospel, you and I are able to 'press on and make the prize our own', as Paul puts it today, to grab hold of the new life God gives us in Jesus Christ, the new life which we celebrate in this and in every Eucharist.

The Lord be with you...