

Fifth Sunday in Lent 2022

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

When you stand and pause in city or large town today the thing you notice most is noise. It is noisy: cars, buses, trains, aircraft, crossing signals, phones, sirens. It is said that we moderns can't cope with quiet. We have created a mass of people who fear silence. In the first century we would be deafened by the silence; what we would have noticed would have been the smell! It is hard for us to imagine a life without sanitation, running water, deodorant or toothpaste; a life where we didn't have to dye our own clothes and slaughter our own livestock. And as we are reminded in the story of Lazarus and in the account of the women going to the tomb with spices on Easter morning there is also a stench of death. No doubt only the rich would have had the means to mitigate the smells that pervaded every neighbourhood. Three hundred Denarii was a goodly sum – perhaps a year's salary. This is the background to the story in today's gospel from John. We've deviated from Luke today because John offers us this account which sets the scene for the coming weeks. Jesus is prepared for both his burial and his betrayal, there is the sweet aroma of attentiveness to another and the awful smell of death.

Lent is a time given for us to really engage with what it is that really matters. Paul does this in his letter to the Philippians. He is proud of his status: *circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.* Yet.....he goes on.....Yet. Yet I am able to set this all aside, because it is a dead end, the death that Paul seeks is one in company with his Lord, one that leads to resurrection. Today's readings from the New Testament in the context of the Lenten season ask of us a question: are we living in such a way that it is a dead end? We can see how Paul deals with this, and we can see too how Mary and indeed Martha deal with this. Notice they are still in the same roles that Luke famously wrote about in his gospel. And then there's Judas.

We have a number of problems in both Church and society. One is the problem of noise and the fear of silence, there is too the sense that it is all about me, and there is too the issue of boredom. Lent engages with these problems. If you look at the reading from Isaiah this morning, it speaks to us of renewal, not just a one off but ongoing renewal. First the army of pharaoh is defeated, never to rise and then the wilderness is turned into a new Eden, from oppression and violence and from the barren wilderness God does something new, out of nothing, comes renewal. And yet if you look at the continuation of that passage you read: *Yet...yet you did not call upon me, O Jacob; but you have been weary of me, O Israel!* What more can I do! The psalmist has grasped it: When the Lord turned again the fortunes of Zion: then were we like those restored to life.

This is the problem of Judas. He has seen glimpses of this renewal in the life and ministry of Jesus. Seemingly from nowhere people have been fed, sins forgiven, wounds are healed and people reconciled, there is new life, remember he is dining with Lazarus! And yet...yet rather than celebrate, rather than relish the aroma, appreciate the moment of silence when Mary kneels before Jesus, he blunders in complaining about bottom line, who's going to pay for this. But worse still is the fact that Judas becomes totally inward looking, it is all about him and we know where that leads him. Judas inhabits a world which revolves around him. Judas is impatient, weary and bored.

What is missing is the sweet aroma of gratitude. The extravagant gift of Mary is a gift of pure gratitude. I don't know whether Mary's gift was indeed worth a year's salary, but what I do know is that she was offering something that reflected how she felt about the renewal that she had seen in her life, in the life of her brother Lazarus and even in the life of Martha her sister. There are no words, silence, just a gift.

Mary's response should be our response as we gather to celebrate the Eucharist together. The opposite of our tendency to turn inward, the opposite of boredom and the fruit of silence is gratitude. Gratitude arising from acknowledging the overwhelming generosity of God towards us. The renewal that pervades everything and which elicits from us a gratitude which invades our very ethos. Yes, we are to reach out to those less fortunate than us, there is a strong Biblical imperative for doing so, yes, there will always be those in need. But it is an ethic born not of out pity, piety or altruism, it is not about me, but about God, it is born out of gratitude.

We can but contemplate the overwhelming aroma of that pound of nard and the intense emotion in that house in Bethany. But we would do well this morning and every time that we gather to consider how we might show our gratitude to the God who makes everything new. How we might be antidote to our noisy, rather bored, inward looking world. It is perhaps best put by St Paul as he wrote to the Corinthians:

But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not peddlers of God's word like so many; but in Christ we speak as persons of sincerity, as persons sent from God and standing in his presence.

How could we ever weary or bored of standing in such a place, how could we not be grateful. Amen.