

Dear Friends,

First as always I hope that this letter finds you well and is as good spirits as you can be in these times, I must admit that the continued good weather and sunshine has helped to raise my spirits, as have the ever increasing signs of new life! This weekend though, we are at the edge of Holy Week, with its difficult themes of betrayal and death. This Sunday is Palm Sunday, or Passion Sunday. Both point us in different ways to the events that are to come. Palm Sunday always feels a strange day to me, we often greet it with celebration, cries of hosanna and the waving of palms, one of the Children's Bible's on my bookshelf calls this passage "The great parade" with echoes of hope and celebration. There was of course a celebratory feeling gathered crowds that day, they were certainly hopeful, many would have heard the stories of the raising of Lazarus, and of the many other events of Jesus life and ministry, and anything that challenged the tyranny of Rome was welcomed. Jesus was making a point though, and it was at heart both a challenge to the political and religious elite of the day which were very often intertwined! As he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, across the city the changing of the Roman Guard was taking place with Pilate entering on a war horse and much pomp! No wonder the religious rulers were worried, Jesus was challenging the might of Rome! Both of these "parades" are document historically!

The theme of Passion Sunday gives us a different way into Holy Week, it invites us into the depths of the story, to take a walk through the whole narrative stopping just before the Easter accounts before we walk through it day by day. It looks specifically at the passionate struggle of Jesus in Gethsemane and the cross, and it starts with a look at the woman who came to anoint Jesus and the reaction of those around him:

***While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. But some were there who said to one another in anger, 'Why was the ointment wasted in this way? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.' And they scolded her. But Jesus said, 'Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.'* (Mark 14)**

This is one of two accounts of Jesus being anointed, just before he was to be crucified, in the other account it is Mary (the sister of Lazarus) takes costly perfume, pours it over Jesus feet and wipes them with her hair, in this shocking act she like the unnamed woman from Mark is also criticised.

***Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'* (John 12)**

Were there two anointings by two different women, we don't really know, of course it is possible, but then it is also possible that the two gospels written many years apart to different audiences record the incident differently. That said there are similarities, in both cases Jesus received the ministry of these bold women who with extravagant gesture pour costly perfume/ ointment over Jesus, daring to break convention, daring to show love and devotion in a way nobody has before. For a woman to approach a man in this was shocking, for Mary to let down her hair was an intimate act, as for the male disciples and specifically the named Judas they seem to miss the point and take their annoyance out on the extravagance of the women,

but I suspect they were just as perplexed at the acceptance, and attitude of Jesus, perhaps these encounters best set the scene for us as we enter into Holy Week in these strange days. We are living in extraordinary times, and seeing extraordinary events, alongside the deep grief that the world is bearing in the numbers of people who have died during the pandemic there have been amazing acts of kindness and generosity. There has also been the amazingly fast development of several vaccines, none of which have been without controversy, questions about how this has been achieved so quickly, questions about safety, questions about fair distribution all surround these vaccines alongside the hope that is engendered as the vaccines are distributed. This is something that will change the world, but of course it would be way too far a stretch to suggest that the vaccine is our saviour, but it can cause us to reflect upon the ongoing nature of salvation, and how in giving ourselves to the story and allowing it to join with our story so we enter into the ongoing action of God who did not in Christ-Jesus hold back from suffering and death but poured out life for us all. The question is are we ready to receive it, openly and humbly as Jesus did the anointing offered by the women? To receive the life of Christ in our lives means setting aside our egos and being willing to be served that we might be those who serve with the love, with the courage, with the passion that we encounter in these women!

I leave you with a short meditation and a picture:

*Costly extravagance
love poured out for love
first given, love
anointing death for life,
filling the air,
seeping into every pore,
assaulting the senses, here
heartbreak and hope
mingle and flow free,
soaking and searching,
an insistent anointing
of love mirroring love's
unfettered
unbounded abundance,
costly extravagance,
this is
love poured out for love,
anointing death for life...*



As we prepare to enter into Holy Week may we be those who are ready to receive the all extravagant divine gift! May God bless and keep you.

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