

John 12.1-8

Introduction

- As Jesus approaches the end of his journey to Jerusalem we switch from LUKE to JOHN. Today's short, strange episode highlights the very different ways people reacted to Jesus as his 'hour' drew near.
- When we looked at Lk13 I said that Jesus's whole life (not just the cross) was about defeating evil and setting people free from its power – free to live a new life, reconciled to God. Perhaps no instance highlights this more than the raising to life of Lazarus (John 11).

Context

- The raising of Lazarus brings the war between good and evil right out into the open and has a very DIVISIVE effect.
- Many of the Jews put their faith in Jesus (11.45)
- Some others report him to the authorities (11.46)
- The Sanhedrin (Temple Court) is confused but its leader, High Priest Caiaphas speaks more truth than he realizes when he says it is better for one man to die for the people than for everyone to be destroyed (11.49-52).
- From then on the priests and Pharisees are plotting to kill Jesus and he has to go into hiding.
- 11.55-57 tells how everyone in Jerusalem is waiting and looking for Jesus. PASSOVER is about to begin, the great annual celebration of the Exodus, the liberation of ancient Israel from slavery in Egypt.
- A new and greater Exodus is about to take place, as Isaiah had prophesied. This came out really clearly in today's OT reading:-

This is what the LORD says – he who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters, who drew out the chariots and horses, the army and reinforcements together, and they lay there, never to rise again, extinguished, snuffed out like a wick:

Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?

I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.

(Isaiah 43.16-19)

- Isaiah's prophecy is fulfilled in Jesus but not everyone can accept the 'new thing' that God is doing, as we see in today's gospel incident, which follows on from the raising of Lazarus.

John 12.1-8

A dinner is given in honour of Jesus by Lazarus and his family. Martha is serving, Lazarus is at the table, living proof of the power and authority of Jesus. Notice how Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, marks the occasion.

Mary

She takes about 0.5 litre of expensive perfume, probably her most valuable possession, pours it on the feet of Jesus, wipes his feet with her hair and the whole house is filled with the fragrance of the perfume. How should we interpret this?

- Mary did not always understand Jesus and recently felt badly let down by him when he failed to arrive in time to stop her brother dying (11.32).
- She had wept with Jesus, then followed him to her brother's tomb and witnessed his power over death and put her faith in him.
- Mary sees the compassion, the authority and the goodness of Jesus and SHE SEES GOD. She sees God in Christ defeating evil and bringing freedom and new life. She responds in the only way she can, worshipping him and honouring him with all she has.
- Mary's display of worship is shocking and embarrassing in its intimacy, its lack of restraint, its recklessness. We are told that the whole house is filled with the fragrance of the perfume, but the fragrance is not pleasing to everyone present.

Judas

It is very easy to see Judas Iscariot as the villain of the New Testament and to project all the blame onto him. It is true that both Luke and John see him as being prompted or even possessed by the devil during or just before the Last Supper (Luke 22.3, John 13.2, 13.27)...

- But at THIS meal, Judas is expressing what others were no doubt thinking. People who thought they knew what Jesus was about are confused and disappointed at this point.
- Couldn't this perfume, worth a whole year's wages, have been sold and the money given to the poor?

- Well of course it could have been! But although Jesus was certainly concerned to help the poor, the gospels do not record him telling everyone to sell all their valuables and give the money away.
- Jesus is in fact doing something far greater for people trapped by the evil of poverty and not just the evil of poverty but all other forms of evil. Remember again his manifesto in Luke 4:-

*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.* (Lk 4.18-19, quoting Is 61.1-2)

- Jesus's whole life was a war against evil (1 John 3.8). Most people, even Judas, could see and agree with that.
- But the death of Jesus on the cross and the amazing reversal of the resurrection were the dramatic and decisive victory of that war:-

So that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil – and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. (Hebrews 2.14-15)

- And this was too hard for Judas and others to swallow because it didn't fit the pattern of what they expected Jesus to do.
- The beauty and truth of Mary's action touched Jesus and received his approval because it pointed towards his death and the saving significance of that death.
- But Judas and others among the disciples seem to have been expecting Jesus to defeat evil by force and to restore a military and political Israel.
- They were mistaken and people today who expect the second coming of Jesus to be a blood bath in which he puts all God's enemies to the sword are equally mistaken. Especially if they think they can help him by bombing or shooting some of those enemies now!
- Violence is not defeated by violence. Evil is not defeated by evil. Jesus is about to enter Jerusalem on a donkey, not a war horse.
- The victory of Jesus over evil is the victory of love, pure, boundless, unselfish love.

*Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?* (Isaiah 43.18-19)

- Judas didn't perceive it; at least not until it was too late (Mat 27.3-4). He looked at Jesus and felt let down, disillusioned and betrayed. His heart was hardened against the love of God and vulnerable to be taken over by evil.
- Mary did perceive it, intuitively, without fully understanding. When she looked at Jesus she saw pure compassion, she saw the defeat of sin and death, she saw God and she worshipped him.

Conclusion

What about us? Do we have a dusty old bottle of perfume locked away somewhere? Are we holding back from joining in fully with the new thing God is doing in the world?

My prayer for all who hear or read this is:-

- that we would not be locked into our preconceived ideas of what God ought to be doing in the world,
- that we would look afresh at Jesus and especially at his victory of self-emptying love.
- that we would pour out our lives in gratitude, in worship, in service, in powerful but peaceful opposition to evil, following the example of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.