**Sunday 7th April 2019 – 5th Sunday of Lent**

**Readings:** Isaiah 43: 16 - 2; Philippians 3: 4b - 14; John 12: 1 - 8

All of scripture is about the story of God’s relationship and response to us, and ours to him, and in all his encounters with us, Jesus sheds light on situations so we can see clearly the path of life – the way of love and righteousness – the way of faith and trust.

Isaiah reminds us of the starting point of our journey –

This is what the Lord says – he who made a way.

A way through the chaos, a way from exile to homeland, a way from wilderness to verdant pastures a land full of goodness – full of milk and honey.

That God is Sovereign and Lord of all is the starting point of all our journeys – he is creator, he sustains all things, he knits the fabric of the universe together and provides all things. All things come for him, and all things belong to him. But even more than this, he is the God of love, a generous God whose nature is to give. And he chooses us to bear his image (there is no greater gift) trusting that we will both care for and share his delight in the goodness of all he has made. And whilst he formed us for himself, he lives in hope that we will seek him, know him, and love him in the same way he loves us – unconditionally. And that this unconditional love will be our source of praise and joy.

It all starts with God who initiates everything even the planting of a homing device within us to help us find our way to him through the clamour and distractions around us.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus is at the home of very close friends, doing what he likes to do best – reclining at table, receiving their hospitality, being in communion, sharing his life with theirs.

His best friends are with him, his closest and most loved companions.

That is our experience too, now in this moment.

Mary opens an expensive jar of perfume – what is smelt in the room – the fragrance that permeates the house is love. What Mary is about to do is Sacrament – an outward sign of an inward invisible grace.

The breaking of the seal on the jar and pouring out of the perfume is a sign of Mary’s broken-open heart to Jesus, broken-open in love. This is what God does for us at creation, this is what God does for us in Jesus on the cross, and Mary enters into this way of love as she baths Jesus feet in perfume (pure nard) and wipes them with her hair.

Mary makes herself vulnerable, open to criticism and ridicule, but she does it anyway with no concern for herself, or what others think of her. Her focus is her Lord, her concern is to honour him, to show unconditional, selfless acts of service. Pride, status, self-image, money, the cost to herself don’t count for anything. None of this matters to her. Her actions flow from a pure heart.

Make no mistake – all of the house guests would have been shocked by this. It was culturally highly inappropriate for Mary to be that intimate with a man not her husband – she would be exposing herself to ridicule and bringing her character into dis-repute. Only *those sorts of women* would do this. Mary of Bethany, this Mary, is often confused with Mary Magdalene, often wrongly considered to have been a prostitute, but they are not the same Mary.

We all know that the outward appearance is not what is important to Jesus – his concern is for the condition of our heart. He silences those who criticise Mary and speaks in her defence. *Leave her alone*

In John’s account of the story, it is Judas Iscariot who vocalises the objection – but I can’t imagine that others around the table didn’t also view Mary’s actions as extravagant and inappropriate. I can’t imagine there weren’t other sharp intakes of breath and mutterings. ‘How could Jesus let that happen’. ‘What was he THINKING…, what was SHE thinking’. And with all that nard, we can no longer smell the wine or Martha’s cooking. I can also imagine that there were other more colourful thoughts going on.

The gospel stories are real – about real people, real emotions, real situations, real humanity – the goodness of our being, the heights that are attainable as well as the darker baser side. Both light and dark are part of our lived experience, God sees it all, knows it all and we must be honest about it. Perhaps Judas’s words popped out before he realised what he had said. His objection did not come from a pure heart, his motives are dishonest, but like a wolf in sheep’s clothing he dresses up his complaint. *That money could have been put to better use* – *it would have been more important to feed the poor!* We all do this – there is a spin doctor in all of us - we all distort the truth to protect ourselves, we all construct arguments from our own perspective or use emotional blackmail to get our own way, or to elevate and place ourselves in a better light. There is a bit of the thief in all of us – who take what does not belong to us or put another way – who retain for themselves what belongs to God.

Some years ago I met someone who was always the first to open her home for any gathering of the church. On one occasion I thanked her for her generosity. She spoke the truth when she responded - well it all belongs to God anyway!

Judas Iscariot often gets a bad press – but he is part of our story, the shadow side of our character to show us who we are too and through him just as much as with Mary, Jesus sheds light, to show us who we are and who he wants us to be. There is a bit of the Prodigal Son’s older brother in all of us. The one who proports to be home doing the right thing, who’s heart is in fact just as far away from the Father as the younger brother’s.

The Gospel reading today is the story of two characters who encounter Jesus, but who choose different paths.

Like them we have a choice too, and through God’s grace are continually being brought towards the narrow path.

In his letter to the Philippians Paul says -

I want to know Christ – he is passionate about this, determined daily to press on towards to goal, to take hold of the prize to which God has called him. The prize isn’t getting to heaven when we die, the prize is already ours, here on earth.

Mary understood that she already had the prize and she gave herself away in response – she gave herself away for the sake of Christ.

For Paul, the prize was to know the power of Christ’s resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him.

What is it for you? What is your response to God in our midst?

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