**Study Five: Knowing yourself *(John 12:1-8)***

*Going Further: Exegetical notes on the Gospel passage*

* This week we take a break from Luke. The Gospel of John does not get its own year in the three-year cycle of our lectionary. It is divided up and spaced out in small parcels over the three years. This week we hear John’s account of the anointing of Jesus’ feet.
* It is important to remember that this passage comes after the raising of Lazarus (11:1-44). Jesus is no long just a minor nuisance to the powers that be. As word of this act spreads he has become a major threat. Opposition to Jesus hardens and grows more forceful; Holy Week draws closer.
* Mary, Martha and Lazarus call Jesus Lord, so they knew who he was, and yet they are not numbered among his disciples, at least not in any formal sense.  Just like the friendly Pharisees last week, the Gospels depict many shades and degrees of relationship to Jesus. It is never as simple as the “they come to church; they do not come to church” divide into which our thinking sometimes falls.
* The perfume Mary uses is calculated by some scholars to have cost almost $70,000 in today’s money. It is not an insignificant sum.

*Going Deeper: More Thoughts on the Gospel of the week*

*Here is a sermon on this Gospel passage, preached by the author of these studies at Christchurch Cathedral in Ballarat on 17 March 2013. The group as a whole might profit from reading this and reflecting on it together.*

Polite people, so I am told, never discuss politics, sex or religion at dinner parties. If so, the dinner we hear about in this Gospel reading must have been one helluva party! Try, with me, to recreate the scene in your head. Following directly on from Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, and the night before his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, so the night before Palm Sunday, a dinner is laid on for Jesus, prepared and served by the ever-dependable Martha. While they were at the dinner table, where Lazarus (who four days ago was dead) was also feasting, Mary (accustomed to sitting at Jesus’ feet) falls to her knees before him again. Then, literally and figuratively, she lets her hair down. She takes a pound of perfume, drenches Jesus feet with it, so that the fragrance fills all the house, and then caressing his feet with her hair, she wipes them clean.

It is hard to know what aspect of the story is more offensive – the extravagance, the impropriety and sensuality of the encounter, or the tradition-defying image of a woman taking on a priest’s role of anointing. As you replay the scene in your minds, which aspect offends you the most, I wonder, which aspect makes you squirm in your pew?

Judas is pretty sure which aspect he finds most offensive. What an extravagant waste! A pound of pure nard is worth 300 shekels, a year’s wage in Jesus day. According to the ABS, the average annual wage in Victoria last year was $69,212. Close enough to $70,000 in perfume, gone in a moment, and on just one pair of feet! It’s hard not to feel some sympathy for Judas (betrayer and thief though he is) as he voices his outrage. Jesus shows no respect for prudence or social justice. This is not the time for spreadsheets and fiscal planning. His hour has nearly come, and Mary’s extravagance is an appropriate treasuring of what little time he has left with those who love him.

But perhaps for you it’s not the extravagance that offends. Mary goes beyond the bounds of all propriety. Everyone knows it is shameful for a woman to uncover her hair. To let it tumble down her back, revealing the secret thick, shiny, jet-black cascades, out in the open, for all the household to see. And the nard – not just any old smell. Quite apart from being costly, and imported from India, nard meant something. It had a sweet, yet heavy musky smell, reminiscent of the secret smells of lovers. It is the perfume associated with sensuality. Nard is mentioned several times in the Biblical love poem “The Song of Songs,” always in contexts that are undeniably, breathtakingly charged (erotic). The scent of nard is the scent of uninhibited, passionate, extravagant love.

Jesus had given Mary and Martha their lives back as sure as he had given life to Lazarus. Without their brother, the woman faced lives of poverty and homelessness. Martha shows her thanks by the appropriate step of hosting a meal of gratitude. Mary is doing something entirely different, something completely beyond the pale. If it doesn’t make you uncomfortable, if it doesn’t offend, you’re not hearing it the way John intended.

But perhaps for you it’s not the extravagance of the act, or its sensuousness that offends, but the meaning of what she does. John has little respect for convention, tradition or hierarchy. Here he has Mary taking the role of a priest, anointing a man for burial. Elsewhere, later in John, we will see women as the first of the apostles, the first witnesses to the resurrection and the first to proclaim, Christ is risen. And by giving of herself so completely, without regard for social convention or what anyone else in the household might think, so self-sacrificially, she is the one person in this Gospel who shows us what the footwashing on Maundy Thursday means. There Jesus will tell his disciples, “…you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. …. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.” Mary is the one, the only one, who has already done it.

Two weeks out from Easter Day, why does the lectionary give us a Gospel reading that is so offensive, and on so many levels? The answer is in our first reading. ‘Thus says the Lord, “Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”’ In Christ Jesus, God is doing a new thing, and it is not hostage to the things of old, or social convention or what feels comfortable. We are drawing close to the one love, the only love, that is stronger than death, the only love that asks nothing in return, a love fore-shadowed in the actions of Mary this morning, and perfected in God’s act on Easter morning. It is a love active in our own lives, as the Holy Spirit wells up in our hearts. God’s question is a question put to each one of us, comfortable or not, welcome or not. Examine your life; listen to the stirrings of your heart. ‘Thus says the Lord, “Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”’

**Study Six: True Discipleship *(Luke 19:28-40)***

*Going Further: Exegetical notes on the Gospel passage*

* This passage has been picked as the Gospel reading of the day, although in many parishes it will be read outside the church before the service begins, when the palm crosses are blessed, and the actual place of the Gospel in the eucharist will be taken up by a reading of the Passion according to Luke (22:14-23:56).
* All four gospels recount the story of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem (cf. Matt 21:1-9; Mark 11:1-10; John 12:12-16). A king riding an ass recalls an Old Testament prophecy – “Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey” (Zech 9:9).
* Bethany and Bethphage are villages only two miles and one mile respectively from Jerusklaem on the slopes of the Mount of Olives. The former, as we heard last week, is home to Mary, Martha and Lazarus.
* Some say that Luke is the most Hellenistic or Greek or all the Gospels, and it may be for this reason that Jesus is praised in Luke as King but not as Son of David, and that the crowd is not recorded shouting the Aramaic word ‘Hosanna’.
* Only in Luke are the people who welcome Jesus’ entry identified as disciples, who probably came with him from Galilee.

*Going Deeper: More Thoughts on the Gospel of the week*

The palm cross that most Anglican parishes bless and distribute on Palm Sunday is an interesting thing. It is rich with symbolism. The prayer of blessing which we say over them expresses that symbolism in the traditional way—asking God that they may be for us signs of Christ’s victory. People keep them all year long, tucking them into their bible or their diary as a small reminder of that victory and of our salvation.

The palm cross, however, has another side, a darker side, a side that takes into Holy Week – and the power of the symbol in part comes from holding these two sides together in the one object. Consider the palm cross. It is, obviously, made out of palms, the sign of the praise and worship that the crowds accord to Jesus on his entry to Jerusalem, as we hear in the Palm Sunday liturgy. But it is made into the shape of the cross, that Roman instrument of torture and death which was so painful to the earliest Christians that it does not even appear in Christian art until after the end of persecution in the fourth century. Praise woven into suffering. Add to that the timing of their distribution. They are the symbol of the rejoicing crowd, that crowd which we know well will have vanished away in less than week. Having first turned on Jesus, baying for his blood, they will then melt away altogether, and will leave him hanging.

In this sense, the palm cross is a symbol of discipleship gone wrong. Just as the crowds who wave these things first turn to Jesus and then disappear, so this symbol of praise woven into suffering is a reminder that our discipleship is not without sin.

Probably we think of our failings in ministry and our failings in service to one another mostly in terms of the times we did nothing. “All that is takes for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing”, so the saying goes. All of us will know times we were too busy, too important or too lazy to help someone we should have. But there is another way in which Christians can sin, precisely *by doing things*, but by doing them wrongly or badly. This is what St John Chrysostom means when he says that the road to hell is paved with priests’ skulls. This is what Henry Thoreau, the American author, means when he said that if he knew that a Christian were coming to his house with the express purpose of doing him good, he would run for his life.

For example, when the author of these studies was the Vicar of Battersea in London, one day a woman turned up in the parish, after she had been expelled from her home group in a large, well-known parish on the other side of the river. The home group leader no doubt thought she was being a good disciple. This woman’s husband had divorced her and a she had moved in with a new partner. The Bible (on one reading) tells you not to associate with people like that, so the home group leader knew she had to be cast out. The woman arrived in my church in tears, the support group that she needed most and had most relied on in the past having suddenly turned its back on her.

In the author’s current parish, an assistant curate in the 1980s visited the home of a parish family with two kids in confirmation class, and told the parents that the children were not learning the faith well enough or fast enough, and that they could not proceed to confirmation. Understandably, the parents found this insulting and mystifying. The whole family, eight of them, stopped coming to church that day. Stories like this are easily multiplied, and can be useful examples of the two-edged nature of the palm cross, but they can also be distractions from the most important and more difficult task of focussing on our own failings.

What particular ministry mistakes you who are reading this have made, I cannot say. But you know. When you hold your palm cross, and think of that symbol of praise woven into a killing machine, what memories of your own misplaced ministry come to the surface? Who are the people you tried to help, but in fact wounded? What are the occasions on which you did what you thought was the right thing, what was God’s will, but caused more pain than good? Or perhaps it is not you, but the ministry of the parish as a whole that has wounded particular people. These are the things that come to my mind on Palm Sunday, as I think of myself—just one among many in the fickle crowd watching Jesus—and of my own failures to walk true in the narrow way.

Even in this, in our failures as disciples, there is Good News. Sometimes God works out our salvation despite us, not through us. Time (or God or both) have healed some of the wounds. The expelled woman found a new spiritual home and was able to put her pain behind her. The mother of the boys expelled from confirmation class has returned to worship after the death of her husband, some thirty years after that fateful visit.

Although it is true that God undoes our mistakes, and binds up where we wound, it is not a good idea to presume too much on God’s grace and goodness. That’s why I keep my palm cross, and seeing it in the middle of my prayer book, I am prompted to stop and think. Why am I doing what I am about to do? Am I doing it for my sake or out of genuine compassion? Do I hope more for my own good out of it or for the good of the other? And, if your parish distributes palm crosses, I hope that your palm cross helps you like that too.