Week 5

Prepare yourself by reading John 12.1-11

Reflections on the Gospel reading

In this account of the anointing of Jesus we are reminded that the Gospels all head toward Jerusalem and the death of Jesus on the cross. Here as we draw close to the end of the season of Lent we have almost reached that point. Jesus is readied for his death by his dear friend Mary.

Everything that Jesus was and did in his ministry was for our benefit and that of the whole creation. The letter to the Hebrews emphasises that Jesus shared our human condition completely, and thus he experienced birth and death, and knew the apprehension of entering and leaving this bodily existence. These events that are the beginning and end of every human life also bookended the human existence of Jesus. The Gospels affirm that Jesus was born as we are, and Paul too writes “when the fullness of time had come, God sent his son, born of a woman” (Gal 4.4). Through Mary and the Holy Spirit, Jesus at his birth, entered into the present moment existence where all life happens. Paul wrote that the embracing of our human existence by Jesus was done willingly (Phil 2.4-8).

Jesus in the Gospels is recorded as having a confrontational approach to death and when he encountered people whose lives were diminished by grief or ended by death, he tackled it head on. So, by the time Jesus had to face his own death, he had already given life back to a young man in the town of Nain who was being carried to his burial place (Luke 7.11-15). He had taken a young girl by the hand and raised her from her death bed (Luke 8.54). Here in this week’s reading from John, Jesus had walked up to the tomb and reversed the rituals of Lazarus’ death. The tomb that held Lazarus a prisoner in death was opened, his body was unwrapped. In all these instances the once deceased person was given back to their family; new life for all where previously death and grief had reigned.

In these three stories of death-reversal the people involved were young. They had the bulk of their lives ahead of them. It all seemed unfair and unnatural for their lives to have ended so soon. When Jesus encountered the funeral procession of the young man in Nain his immediate emotional response was the same as that of the father of the young man in last week’s study - *splagchnizomai.* Interestingly the response of gut-wrenching emotional pain and anger was directed to the mother who was bereft of her only son and being already a window was now without male support. No doubt Jesus would have been angry that death had claimed a young man in his prime, but his anger was here was directed to the mother’s situation. She was as good as dead without her husband and son who gave her life meaning and protection.

These physical deaths were not the only instances where Jesus intervened to reverse life ending experiences. Jesus gave new life to everyone who experienced imprisonment rather than freedom in their present moment existence. Jesus’ present moment life brought him into the pained empty lives of lepers who were like the living dead. Physical death for them was a merciful release from the existence of social death. Their skin disease took away their family, their local community and religious community. No one wanted to know them or be near them. They were robbed of human touch and tenderness. When a group of lepers approached Jesus one day desperately hoping for life in their here and now death, his response was – you may have guessed it – *splagchnizomai.* Jesus was shocked and horrified that this death situation could reign in God’s life-filled present. He touched them, took the death into himself and cancelled it.

Think about – Jesus chosen to lead the way

Jesus was anointed by Mary as a preparation for his death. What was the tradition of anointing in the Bible? What would people have seen in it as adding to Jesus’ death? Olives were an incredibly valuable resource in the ancient world. The oil was used for cooking, first aid, a cosmetic, to fuel lamps, and was a store of value; it could be traded like money. Indeed, it was so valuable that during times of war, armies would try to cut down their enemy’s olive trees to cripple their economy. Olive trees were regarded as a symbol of peace because they took years to grow to maturity and produce a crop. If they managed to grow to maturity, it was because there had been a long period of peace. Anointing with oil has a rich multi-faceted history in the Bible. It was a sign of God’s peace and reconciliation (Psalm 133) (Genesis 8.11).

The significant stories associated with olive oil however are anointing stories. When someone was chosen as a leader of God’s people they were anointed on the head with olive oil. This was the case with the choosing of David as king by Samuel (1 Sam 16.13) and Jehu as king by the prophet (2 Kings 9.1-7). God was the one who chose the leader – the anointing was done by a human being in God’s service. God chose, appointed the leader, and put him in place to lead the people in a certain context and time.

Jesus was chosen as the Messiah, the leader of God’s people. His leadership was however not to come about through a military victory but through obediently walking up the hill of Calvary to be nailed to a cross. His leadership could only come through his death. Mary in anointing Jesus was saying that God has chosen him, appointed him.

Think about – our entry into and exit from life

Life in the present moment is always a mixed bag of happiness, fun, challenge, fear, anxiety, wonder, inclusion and exclusion, fellowship, aloneness and loneliness. Every person’s experience of everyday living is unique and the experience of the range of emotions and conditions just mentioned varies from person to person. This present life is always a challenge. Our bodies are always firmly located in the here and now, but when living becomes too tough, our minds are all too easily drawn back to a safe place or projected forward to dream of better times. There are many indescribable pains experienced in daily living, but the hardest all involve death in one form or another.

Our lives in the present moment are bookended by our birth and death. We can make choices about much of what happens to us in our here and now, but no one ever made the decision to be born. Similarly, no one can avoid the inevitability of death. One day it will happen to each of us and there’s nothing we can do to prevent it.

The 20th century philosopher Martin Heidegger described the fact of being born into the world as ‘thrown-ness’. He was saying that we have been tossed into this existence through no choice of our own and we must make the best of it. Against Heidegger’s matter of fact approach to life, the Gospels look at it differently and positively. Is there any purpose in our being here and now? How are we to live the life we have? We can be overwhelmed with the prospect of a life of hard work ahead filled with grief and pain and heading inevitably towards death . . . or we can see this time as a huge opportunity from God. Our limited life is a gift from God, a time to learn to be the human beings that God would have us be. Jesus was well aware that his here and now time was limited, and he saw his allocation of earthly years as a commission to extend God’s kingdom; his brief was to live a servant life for the benefit of others.

Heidegger also said that our life is an experience of ‘being toward death’. Every person’s experience of living here and now will be unique but we must all come to terms with the fact that our lives are heading towards death and will end at some point. Our time here is limited and that can and does cause some degree of anxiety for people. There is however the good news that the God who has allowed us to be born into our death-destined existence has also gone through it all in Jesus. Jesus was born into an earthly life that would come to an end through his death. Death, however it comes, is the end of every life.

One of the foremost early American novelists was Willa Catha who lived in the mid 19th century on the edge of the newly settled wilderness. In addition to several important books describing everyday life in frontier America her most important novel was Death Comes For The Archbishop. After a lifetime of Christ-like courage, living every day to extend the God’s kingdom in the desert areas of New Mexico the old bishop catches a very bad cold and takes to his bed. His young chaplain tries to cheer the old man - “*you should not be discouraged; one does not die of a cold*”. The old bishop replied “*I shall not die of a cold my son. I shall die of having lived*” (p300).

The end of our present moment life is inevitable and it as the bishop stated – it will be the result of having lived. We are blessed if we have the chance to finish our lives positively, having reflected on our life, thanking those who have shared it, asking pardon for shortcomings and resolving to move forward with faith. As he approached the end of his earthly journey, the former Bishop of Edinburgh Richard Holloway wrote an excellent book Waiting For The Last Bus. In it Holloway wrote “*looking back, what I regret most about the rush is missing so much of my own life. I don’t mean missing it now. I mean missing it then, missing it while I was in the midst of it. I am sorry I did not pay more attention to the world while I was rushing through it.*” (p149).

Think about – both you and the Church are chosen to serve Jesus here and now

Anointing of God’s people with holy oil happens at the bookend moments of life. Birth and death are anointing moments, chosen by God moments. When people are born into Christ through baptism they are traditionally anointed with blessed oil, a sign of the fact that God has chosen them to bear God’s image and serve God as a member of the body of Christ, the Church.

Some may see their lives as no more than an experience of random thrown-ness, tossed into existence and struggling to find a meaning to it all. We must regard our lives as a gift and call from God, an opportunity to learn to be Christ-like, to be fully human. The oil on the forehead of the newly baptised baby or adult is God’s seal of approval on a new life that can only be lived in the here and now. It will be a life with purpose. It will be a life to be measured, assessed at the end. When people are ready to end their earthly journey of discipleship, anointing with oil speaks of the chosen-ness of their life’s journey. It began with God, it ends with God. They have been chosen to move forward to their reward of an eternity in God’s presence.