

Sunday 7th April 2019 Cathedral, Grahamstown 7.30 & 9.30 a.m.		5th Sunday in Lent – Year C PASSION SUNDAY
Isaiah 43:16-21	Ps 126	Philippians 3:4b-14
		John 12:1-8

“Then Mary brought a pound of very costly perfume, pure oil of nard, and anointed Jesus’s feet and wiped them with her hair, till the house was filled with the fragrance” (Jn 12:3).

PASSIONTIDE & DEATH

Today is the 5th Sunday in Lent – with Lent as the time, the season of repentance. A time to turn our lives around. A time to encounter and receive once again the grace and love of God.

The 5th Sunday in Lent – today - is traditionally known as Passion Sunday. Today marks the start of Passiontide – the last two weeks of Lent, the season of the Passion. The word “passion” is a powerful one: it can refer to strong emotion, an outburst of anger, sexual love, or enthusiasm. But the word is based on the Latin word which means “to suffer”. It is this meaning which we focus on during Passiontide: the suffering and death of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We are left with no doubt as to what Jesus is to endure, and why: “for us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and was made man; for our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried...” *For us and our salvation...For our sake...* There is no beating about the bush, no avoiding of this stark reality: Jesus is to die; his death on the cross is for our sake; his hour and glory is his suffering and death.

During these final two weeks of Lent we are taken to the heights of affirmation and success and recognition, followed by disaster,¹

betrayal, suffering and death: the triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday; the growing sense of crisis and looming disaster during Holy Week; the Maundy Thursday events of the Last Supper, the foot washing, Jesus's final prayers for his disciples (John 17); his prayers of agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, the betrayal by Judas, the mockery of a trial before Pilate; and then the pain and suffering of Good Friday: the road of humiliation, the procession to Calvary and the place of the cross, the final suffering and death of Christ.

It is a strange mixture of contradictions: in human terms, everything went wrong. Whatever might have been in the minds of the disciples on Palm Sunday – perhaps a take-over of Jerusalem? A spontaneous uprising? A change of religious leadership, with Jesus as the new high priest? We don't really know what they were thinking or hoping for. But whatever it was, as they say, it all went pear-shaped when Jesus was arrested and sentenced to death. Their hopes and dreams ended on the cross. In human terms, in human understanding, Holy Week was a disaster. When Jesus died on the cross, it was the death of a dream.

But in the eyes of the Gospel writers, the suffering and death of Jesus was no accident, but rather the unfolding of God's design and plan for the salvation of all. This is particularly clear in the Gospel of St John, for whom the death of Christ was the pre-destined "hour" (kairos). In John's Gospel, the final cry of Jesus on the cross was "It is finished!" "It is accomplished!" "I have done what the Father sent me to do!" It was a cry not of defeat, but of victory.

MARY ANOINTS JESUS

In our Gospel reading for today (John 12:1-8), Mary anoints Jesus' feet with costly perfume, and wipes them with her hair. We are presented with two themes in this gospel story. Firstly, there is the theme of intimacy and love and worship, the action of the faithful disciple, Mary who anoints the feet of Jesus as an act of love and adoration. Secondly, there is the theme of impending doom and growing sense of disaster, the premonition of death, a prophetic

action of what is to happen. The anointing of Jesus by Mary sets the scene for what is to come. Linked to that is the action of Judas, the betrayer and the thief.

Mary's anointing of Jesus has elements of gratitude and love, but it is also more than this. Mary knows, somehow, what others do not, but of which Jesus is aware: that he is heading to his death. Her act of love becomes a prophetic action. Jesus is to die.

Mary and Martha are often taken as typical examples or patterns, models, of what it means to be a true disciple: Mary the contemplative, Martha the activist. Now they are gathered with Jesus in their home, with Lazarus their brother now raised from the dead; and once again Martha is serving. They are having a meal. There is a Eucharistic element to this: breaking of bread and drinking of the cup, with the Lord at the table. Mary is silent, but her actions speak louder than words: she takes a large quantity of immensely costly perfume; anoints Jesus's feet – an act of love and intimacy; wipes them with her hair – and a few days later, on Maundy Thursday, Jesus is to wash the feet of the disciples. Mary's act is a measure of her love and devotion for the Lord.

In our lives of worship, as we gather here Sunday by Sunday, we join Mary as she anoints Jesus's feet. When we spend time in prayer, we are anointing Jesus's feet. When we give time and energy and resources to ensure that our Cathedral is well maintained and properly staffed and supported, we are anointing Jesus's feet. When we set aside time each week to come to church, we are anointing Jesus's feet. We need to worship. It is in worship that we are at our most vulnerable, that we open our hearts and lives to the grace and love of God. We are transformed.

Then Judas Iscariot speaks. He is also a disciple, but he represents the false disciple: he is greedy, dishonest, out for his own gain, and he will betray Jesus. Jesus rebukes him: "she bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. The poor you always have with you,"³

but you do not always have me” (Jn 12:8) – this is not an excuse for personal extravagance, but rather to allow and acknowledge the proper celebration of the presence of the Lord. Judas represents those who, while carrying the name of Christ, misuse their positions or status – whether in church or in any position of power in government - to defraud, to build up their own empires, to manipulate, to control. It is Judas who is the real defrauder of the poor.

THE MEANING OF LIFE AND DEATH

So we are confronted, in stark and clear terms, as Mary anoints Jesus, with his death, and also, in the days ahead, with its meaning. Christ is our High Priest, who enters the Holy Place with his own blood to obtain eternal redemption (Heb 9:11-15). He is the Suffering Servant who “was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities” (Isaiah 53:4-5). His death becomes the ultimate sign of love and hope for us all. His death is not an accident, nor is it a disaster. The death of Jesus is central to our salvation.

We are invited, with Mary, to anoint the feet of Jesus: to worship: to adore, to love the Lord, to pour out all that we are, hearts and lives, joys and sorrows, at his feet, and to be transformed.

I wonder if Mary was weeping as she anointed the feet of Jesus. There are times when we weep, either for what we are experiencing, or for the pain and suffering of others. To anoint the feet of Jesus is to be with those who suffer – such as with those who have lost everything in the floods in Mozambique.

To anoint the feet of Jesus is to be with those in pain, with the angry and desolate. Some of you know that I received my doctorate this past Friday at Nelson Mandela University – and what a celebration it was! But there was also anger. At a number of the graduation ceremonies, including my own, a group of women protesters stood in front of all of us as graduates and our families, with mouths symbolically taped shut in silent protest, and with signs which read “my rapist is graduating –

congratulations?” “His sentence was suspended so he can graduate” – protests sadly similar to the ReferenceList protests here at Rhodes in 2016, against rape and rape culture, and the apparent failure of the university to address it. To anoint the feet of Jesus is to be with those in pain.

CONCLUSION

Sometimes all we can do is to anoint the feet of Jesus. Like Mary, who was unable to prevent the death of Jesus, or change what was to happen, there are often times when we are unable to stop suffering or change the circumstances. But let us anoint the feet of Jesus as we hold in our hearts this longing, this waiting, for things to change for the better, for the rains to come, for power to shift, for the logjam of resistance and despair to break. Let us anoint the feet of Jesus, with Mary, in this time and season of waiting, where there are no quick or easy answers; instead, as Mary did, let us love, and reach out, and grieve, and pray, and worship, and wait... in trust and in faith.

From our Psalm this morning:

“Those that sow in tears shall reap with songs of joy. He who goes out weeping bearing the seed shall come again in gladness bringing his harvest with him”(Ps 126:6-7).

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