

a fragrance of christ

a sermon preached on the

Fifth Sunday in Lent

13 March 2016

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by *fr david moore*, vicar

the lections: Isaiah 43:16-21, Psalm 126, Philippians 3:3-14, John 12:1-8

Lent's final Sunday in this 'Year C' magnificently and terrifyingly illuminates the complex reality of the human heart – and the fact of the stark choice before all of us. Joy? Or calculation?

Today's story is familiar to us. It's among the best-attested Gospel episodes – told by all four evangelists, each in their own way, serving their particular theological purposes.¹ John alone locates the event at the very eve of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.² The story stands as a clear symbol of the choice everyone is going to be confronted with in the terrible events to come: Joy? Or calculation?

Caiaphas' famous bit-part immediately preceding today's story classically portrays the calculating mind: "You do not understand," he tells his rule-keeping legalist colleagues, "that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed".³ This is equivalent to a contemporary manifestation of calculating joy-less logic: the argument that the unity of the church can be accomplished by the persecution of homosexual persons. NO perfume, thank you very much!

What's the problem with the outpouring of perfume? In Luke's account, uniquely, the objection is that the woman applying it is a 'sinner'.⁴ John follows Matthew and Mark in identifying money as the root issue.⁵ In Mark it was 'some' who objected.⁶ In Matthew it's the 'disciples' who were 'angry'.⁷ John alone singles out Judas as an individual manifestation of malevolence.⁸ "Why was this perfume not sold for [one year's wages] and the money given to the poor?"⁹

We're already alerted to the fact that the calculating mind is joy-less – quite literally, kill-joy – unwilling to live in joy's fragrance. Now we can hardly be in any doubt as to Jesus' attitude: he swiftly and thoroughly rebukes the calculating mind! "Leave [Mary] alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you. You do not always have me."¹⁰

Note that responsibility to deal generously with the poor is unquestioned, and assumed – by all the prophets and the entire weight of Jewish tradition. But *genuine* concern for the poor by the rich would in fact result in Sabbath economics reform of the entire economic system which favours the rich – not mere charity crumbs from the table. Recapitulating and summarising his no-holds barred assault on the religious establishment in that long episode in chapter 9, Jesus effectively says: Your excuse for rejecting joy is illegitimate – indeed dishonest.

So... 'six days before the Passover', in the home of the miraculously-raised Lazarus,¹¹ in the midst of the celebration of 'dinner', an extravagant gesture of love in the pouring out of the 'costly nard', "the house ... filled with filled with the fragrance of the perfume".¹² The calculating and joy-less spirit is emphatically rejected by the Jesus who will himself shortly pour out – and ask the Father to receive – his life as an extravagant fragrance.¹³

¹ Mark 14:3-9; Matthew 26:6-13; Luke 7:36-50

² John 12:12ff

³ John 12:50ff

⁴ Luke 7:33-39

⁵ ~~Mark 7:37-39~~ Matthew 26:8-9

⁶ Mark 14:4-5; Matthew 26:8-9

⁷ Matthew 26:8

⁸ ~~Matthew 7:26-8~~ 12:4

⁹ ~~John 6:7-71~~ The amount of '300 denarii' was the equivalent to a year's wages for the average worker.

¹⁰ John 12:5. The amount of '300 denarii' was the equivalent to a year's wages for the average worker.

¹¹ John 12:7-8

¹² John 11:1-44

¹³ John 12:3

John 17

Jesus' invitation to us is to *repent* - from joy-less calculation, to celebrate in the fragrance of profligate and abundant love! St Paul got this – and implored that Christ's disciples are to be the fragrance of Christ.¹⁴

Here then is Lent five's invitation to us. In what ways might we be captive to the calculating mind? Why do we resist joy and delight and love? Why do we refuse to take what our recent guest Sarah Bachelard called the 'risk of delight'? In her marvellous Lent lecture Sarah observed: "We live in an essentially utilitarian culture, and seek for our value and fulfilment in our usefulness, our accomplishments, in the 'good' we do".

I invite us all to hold that thought for a moment... Let us reflect on all the ways in which we wittingly and unwittingly reduce all things, and all persons even, to mere utilitarian value...

Sarah reminded us that "this is where the notion of God creating from and calling forth joy is so subversive... How can we glorify and enjoy God, unless we take joy in the gift God has given? Joy is the meaning of human life, joy in thanksgiving and thanksgiving as joy."¹⁵ Lazarus' sister Mary models for us joy in thanksgiving, and thanksgiving as joy.

We've also heard St Paul this morning, writing to the church at Philippi, confessing that all his calculations were empty, meaningless, all his proud accomplishments counted as nothing.¹⁶ Joy, he realised, is coming to know Christ by sharing in his sufferings, sharing in the power of his resurrection, by becoming like him in his death.¹⁷

Therefore, preparing us in this last week of Lent for the great spiritual undertaking of Holy Week, today's gospel makes the choice before us very clear. Calculation? Or, joy?

"You shed your fragrance," wrote St Augustine, "and I drew in my breath, and I pant for you".¹⁸ Either we align ourselves, then, with the scheming and calculating mind of Caiaphas, Pharisees, and Judas; or we align ourselves with the feast of Lazarus and Martha and Mary, and especially with Mary, pouring herself out extravagantly, filling the house with the fragrance of joy and delight and love.

To conclude, I invite us to pray together our 2016 parish prayer, the prayer of Charles de Foucauld, a man who poured his life out as the fragrance of Christ:

Father,
I abandon myself into your hands.
Do with me what you will.
Whatever you do,
I will thank you.

Let only your will be done in me,
as in all your creatures,
and I will ask nothing else.

Into your hands
I commend my spirit.
I give it to you freely
with all the love of my heart.

For I love you, Lord,
and I need to give myself
into your hands,
with a trust beyond all measure,
because you are my Mother.

Amen.¹⁹

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¹⁴ 2 Corinthians 2:14

¹⁵ The Reverend Dr Sarah Bachelard, 'Risking Delight: Yearning for Joy in a World of Pain', public lecture hosted by the Education Committee of St John's Camberwell, 3 March 2016.

¹⁶ Philippians 3:4,7

¹⁷ Philippians 3:10-11

¹⁸ St Augustine of Hippo, George Appleton (ed.), *The Oxford Book of Prayer*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985, pp5.

¹⁹ As rendered by John Halsey in "Prayer, Politics and Transfiguration", in Kennedy S (ed), *Spiritual Journeys: An Anthology of Writings by people living and working with those on the margins*, Veritas Publications, 1997, pp61-72.