

mary and the non-transactional imagination

a sermon preached on the
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the lections: Isaiah 43: 16-21; Psalm 126; Philippians 3:3-14; John 12: 1-8

In Charles Dickens' novel *Hard Times*, there is a wonderfully awful character named Mr Gradgrind, Mr Gradgrind; he's described as "a man of realities. A man of fact and calculations"; he is the School Board Superintendent in "Coketown", helped in his endeavours by a teacher whose name is Mr M'Choakumchild. The children are schooled in measuring, facts, and regulating: under no circumstances should they use their imaginations. This approach has tragic consequences for Mr Gradgrind's daughter Louisa, who agrees to marry Mr Bounderby, a man "perfectly devoid of sentiment". The reason I mention this story today is that there is a point in the novel at which Mr Gradgrind's way-of-seeing is explained, & I think it has some bearing on our gospel today . . . it goes like this:

It was a fundamental principle . . . that everything was to be paid for. Nobody was ever on any account to give anyone anything, or render anyone help without purchase . . . Every inch of the existence of mankind, from birth to death, was to be a bargain across a counter. And if we didn't get to heaven that way, it as not a political-economical place, and we had no business there.

I'll return to Mr Gradgrind a bit later.

Our gospel reading takes place in the very hospitable, and happy home that is shared by Lazarus and his two sisters, Mary and Martha – they are giving Jesus a dinner, with some invited guests. But while the setting is domestic – with Martha serving, Jesus, Mary and friends reclining at the table – the context is extraordinary. Not long before this meal Lazarus was wrapped up dead in a tomb, but here he is, eating and drinking with the rest of them. If we read beyond the lectionary portion, we learn that at some point in the proceedings a "great crowd" gather outside, come to see Jesus, but also the man reported to have come back from the dead. There is a group of "chief priests" who have come with the intention of putting Lazarus back in the tomb, as he's become a bad influence. They are also, of course wanting to put Jesus out of the picture. There is a strong sense of storm clouds gathering, of the powers of darkness making their way to Jesus, and insisting on a show-down.

It's a most engaging story, I think, a story for our senses as well as our minds & hearts.

We are invited:

to be touched by the love Mary has for Jesus,
to gasp at the pouring out of a "pound of perfume made of pure nard",
to engage our noses, as we try to smell the fragrance that fills the house,
& to consider a challenging question: "Why was this perfume not sold . . . and the money given to the poor?"

The thing that struck me as I re-read the story this week, is that this is the second time in Scripture that Jesus speaks out in defence of Mary. Here Judas accuses Mary of neglecting her duty to the poor (a very serious duty for Jews), and Jesus responds without hesitation: "Leave her alone!". But there is

that other time, isn't there, again around a meal – when Martha accuses Mary of not helping with the serving duties (Luke's story). And on this other occasion Jesus is equally blunt: "Mary has chosen . . . the better part, which will not be taken away from her." "Leave her alone"

It's clear that John has placed this story here, just before Jesus enters Jerusalem, as a highly-charged prelude to his telling of the passion. For as this small family celebrate the return of a dearly loved brother, Mary enacts the anointing of the body of Jesus, readying him for burial while he is still alive. That's the dramatic purpose of the story. But today I want to spend some time focussing on Mary: What does this gesture reveal about her? How has her imagination been shaped by what Jesus has shown about the coming Kingdom? In particular I want to draw attention to Mary's gesture as reflective of a way of seeing and living that has burst through transactional thinking; that has turned on its head the idea that no one should ever, on any account give anyone anything . . . without purchase.

There is nothing of Mr Gradgrind's utilitarian philosophy in Mary's being this day; not one ounce of measuring being done when she breaks open the perfume made of pure nard.

It's not a *useful* gesture – even if she were anointing a dead body, she wouldn't need so much perfume.

It's not a *conventional* gesture – it stands way outside what a group of first century Jews would expect a woman to do in the middle of a dinner party.

It's certainly not an *efficient* gesture – there would be mess and it would take time.

There is something shocking here. A pound of perfume that could have been sold for 300 denarii, when a days work, for an average person, might get you a single denarius.

(One of the lovely things about teaching 12 to 14 year olds is that they tell you what they think. When I tell them about the shepherd who left 99 sheep to save 1 – they always say, "but what about the 99 who have done the right thing?" When I tell them the parable of the talents, they are indignant about the way the landowner treats the third servant, who has hidden his talent in the ground. And when I tell them that Mary spent almost a year's wages on perfume, they look in disbelief. Although interestingly, they see straight away that it is an act of great love, and something to be respected.)

The nature of Mary's vision of how-things-are is highlighted when we contrast it with Judas' way of thinking about the world. Whoever wrote this story is intent on letting us know that Judas' criticism of Mary is not because he "cares for the poor", but because he has another scheme – he pictures the money being added to the common purse, and then sees a moment when he can reach in, and take some of it for himself. Judas is concerned with:

Measuring things up

Getting ahead

Not missing out

Doing the sums

Scheming

Counting

Clinging

Calculating

Seeking out advantage

And of course, it is Judas, who, in the end, carries out the transaction that will lead the authorities to Jesus, in exchange for 30 pieces of silver.

Now none of these impulses, on their own, or in themselves are demonic, are they? There are lots of good reasons to measure, and to weigh up costs and benefits . . . but a life time of calculating and measuring does tend to disfigure our humanity (just as it does the humanity of Mr Gradgrind and his students). I think most of us, most of the time, are a little bit Judas. We weigh up what we will offer; we calculate what we will get in return; we measure up who's doing the lion's share of the work.

And certainly we are formed in a world that is often focussed on numbers and rankings. Year 12 students will often base their subject choices on what will be "scaled up" when their score is worked out; they pick subjects based on how the statistics are done, rather than picking the things they love. In the light of pressures such as this, then and now, an action like Mary's can be readily dismissed as naïve, and no one wants to be naïve, do they!

But it's not naïve, is it? Mary's gesture arises out of her understanding of the new reality that Jesus announces: a life of generous impulse and joyful satisfaction – a life where there is enough for all, and some left over as well. It's this generosity that we see in every aspect of the life of Jesus: in the parables he tells, in the forgiveness he offers, in his acceptance of the cross.

As we move through these last weeks of Lent, perhaps we can take a leaf out of Mary's book, & give some inefficient, non-useful, unconventional gestures a go. And when we feel the Judas part of us being critical, perhaps we might also stop to hear Jesus saying "leave her alone".

When we come to Holy Week, we will see again, as we always do, exactly what Jesus' desire to share, and to heal, and to raise up wrecks, will provoke in the Pharisees and the Herods and the Pilates of this world.

But we will also see, that no matter what the powers of darkness, in their terror and their fury, throw at the Lord of Life, he will remain in the sphere of generosity, forgiveness, and giving of himself. He does this so that we too, with Mary, may be taken into that place where we will be free from the chains of transactional living. So, to the one who makes this deliverance possible, be all glory and praise.