**7th April 2019**

**John 12.1-8**

This week’s Gospel story is about spending everything on what seems to be a futile gesture, and about giving away everything you have for another person.

It is a tremendously humble privilege to observe those who watch and wait at the side of the dying, and for those who work in hospices or with those near to death, as they pour out their care at the precious time of the ending of life. Relatives and loved ones doing round the clock vigils by bedsides, expending themselves because of love and devotion.

Likewise, those who care for the frail and elderly and the disabled. I see the care of parents to children who have special needs, whose behaviour can be challenging to say the least and to say it euphemistically. Those who act as foster carers taking in children who have been abused or damaged or rejected – knowing this will be an ongoing struggle to repair what has been broken. The sacrificial commitment to those who have addictive behaviour, who struggle with guilt and self-loathing, self-pity and destructive behavior – hanging in there, hoping against hope that one day they may be free. I could go on with other scenarios of spending everything on what seems futile: giving away everything you have for another person. Inspired by love.

On the journey towards Jerusalem, Jesus pauses for a meal in Bethany that John in his gospel presents as a sacred moment. Martha is serving, her brother Lazarus is present, and their sister Mary engages with Jesus very publicly, showing her devotion by her action and her costly worship. She pours out some expensive lotion (we are told it costs a year’s wages) on Jesus’ feet.

She and Martha have equal reason to be grateful for the raising of Lazarus, and they show their gratitude in worship and action respectively.

The woman risks shame and rebuke but sees something that she must do for Jesus. It is irrelevant to her that she could have spent the money on a more ‘worthwhile cause’; it is simply enough that she obeyed the inner prompting of her heart and offered her all in response to Jesus. There is no way that this kind of love can be measured or calculated.

Is self-giving love sensible or contained? No.
Can it be embarrassing to see its extravagance? Sometimes.
Is it compelling? Absolutely!

Mother Teresa was known for her sacrificial love to the street beggars of Calcutta. In a caste system and a belief in karma and reincarnation that saw those who were begging as somehow deserving of their fate and therefore to be disregarded, Mother Teresa showed love and dignity.

In his poem *Mother Teresa,*Sydney Carter writes:

Over this dead loss to society
You pour your precious ointment,
wash the feet
that will not walk tomorrow.

Mother Teresa, Mary Magdalene – your love is dangerous.

Peter Owen Jones puts it like this in his book *Small Boat, Big Sea*(Lion Publishing 2001, p.6): ‘*Real love is expensive. So it should be - it demands part of us.’*

Do we have this kind of dangerously generous love at the heart of our mission statement? Well, we have dared to say that we as a church are inspired by Jesus: walking his way of radical love. As we draw near to Easter we meditate once again on the cross and the sacrifice of love Jesus gave on Calvary.

My song is love unknown,
My Saviour’s love to me;
Love to the loveless shown,
That they might lovely be.
O who am I,
That for my sake
My Lord should take
Frail flesh, and die?

Martha and Mary had their brother Lazarus back from the dead because Jesus is the resurrection and the Life: priceless. They responded by giving their all. Our gratitude and worship to God comes freely after we have been the recipients of God’s grace and love: when we have known the true cost of the cross for us; when we have personally known that Jesus died for us, for me.

May this Holy Week remind you once again of the sin of the world, its gravity and seriousness, the need for a saviour, the sacrifice that involved, the debt we owe, yet the grace that is offered to us.

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

We sing all these words – take them in, go deeper in to the salvation and life offered to us through Jesus.

We live in a world that is becoming more mean and less generous; more suspicious of difference and less tolerant; more divided and less able to take the bold steps that are necessary to make peace. There is such a contrast between the wild extravagance of the woman pouring out the expensive perfume and the mean-spirited Judas counting up the cost and taking even what does not rightfully belong to him.

Judas has his own agenda which, according to John, is more about personal gain than concern for the poor. On this occasion, Jesus declines to get involved in a discussion about charitable giving and commends Mary for her costly worship.

But, despite many interpretations through the centuries, Jesus’ comments should not be taken as a manifesto regarding giving – or not – to the poor. Rather, it is about the true value and place of worship. We should be asking ourselves if our worship is the sort that fills the room – and the world – with its fragrance. Showing love in Jesus name – to rich or poor. The charity at home and the charity that extends to the neighbour overseas.

Revd Brian Williscroft and his wife Noeleen did a ministerial exchange with the Tabernacle in 1997 and were greatly loved here. Since then the Tab membership has changed greatly but there are still some who remember Brian and Noeleen. David Evans wrote to them after the terrible shootings at the mosque in Christchurch and we received a response from them this week:

*Your gracious letter arrived yesterday, and I confess it brought a tear or two to my eyes.
Yes. It was a horror!
But, in no small measure to the initial response of our Prime minister, it had the reverse national response of the intended brutality. If you have seen the pictures you will notice that the P.M. has adopted respectful dress for her meetings with Muslim folk, and her refusal to give the perpetrator the honour of a name, set a reaction that   took the population into a response few could have imagined.
The deliberate action in honouring the place of so many refugees with whole-hearted respect and the positive inclusion within the Maori community has strengthened the determination of the vast majority of Kiwi’s to the reverse of the intention of that poor sick man.
The immediate reaction to the ban on destructive weapons has taken the “gun lobby” by surprise and jolted the American gun lobby into an attempt to sway the legislation that will be law in a few days’ time. They are not welcome!
Anti-Muslim antagonism has been dramatically diminished and ante refugee prejudice has almost vanished.
(Incidentally we have a refugee family, of two adults and three children, over our back fence who are newly arrived and just finding their feet.) Many of our “whole of life” Christian folk are confused - that anyone would attack people at prayer - and what our relationship with Islam should be but I am convinced that the tragedy has been the reverse of what the poor sick man intended. We are stronger in faith and better aware of the human community that we belong to.
That Dursley Tab should pray for us is humbling and throws into light the wonderful grace and love of a great bunch of people. Our memories of 1997 are constantly with us.
I remember you with love and Noeleen joins me in thanking you for your gracious letter.

Humbly with love, Brian*

It has been encouraging to see the reaction of the New Zealanders to this atrocity – not to turn in on themselves and become more mean, suspicious and intolerant – but the reverse. May God bless and help them.

The situation in Parliament has been fluid this week. Failure to agree and the resulting confusion, anger and despair have led to positions becoming more polarized. We wonder how the deadlock can be broken. Jeremy Corbyn has met with Teresa May to [attempt to thrash out a plan for Brexit](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-47807622). What will be the cost of negotiation and of compromise in a world where both are in short supply? It takes an act of generosity and risk not to expect the worst of a rival group, or to break through a difficult situation or to make peace. What sacrifices, large and small, will be needed?

On the issue of climate change: what sacrifices will be required of us and of governments in order [to save our planet](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/apr/03/domestic-flights-chris-grayling-planet-flybe-trains-emissions)?

In the end, it does not matter how little you have; what really matters is what you chose to do with what you do have. It is not only a moment of extravagance that counts, but also the discipline of cultivating an attitude of gratitude so that when the moment comes for a sacrificial action, we know in our hearts how to respond. What can I do for you?

Our AGM will remind us of the sacrifices people make in time, money and talents to keep this church going and doing stuff that we hope and pray makes a difference for the better. Most of that work is voluntarily and freely given, for which we are all collectively so grateful. Like Mary – it is freely and willingly given – out of love and gratitude to God – and some are able and willing to give a lot and others aren’t - and I hope we all understand that and make no judgements. Our two-minute testimonies have reminded us that we are all the church, wherever we are – so Christian witness and service is as much in the workplace as it is in these buildings. None is more special than another. All is part of our calling and sacrifice of love as we walk the way of Jesus.

Mary’s action is prophetic though in two ways. First, as Jesus says, it is a sign of his own imminent burial. Like the women who follow Jesus to the cross and the tomb, Mary does not look away as Jesus’ suffering and death draw near. She stays with him through the pain and agony.

Second, this may well have been the act that inspired Jesus to wash his disciples’ feet in the following chapter. Acts of love and kindness often prompt those who receive them to show the same love and kindness to others – and this infectious principle underlies the new commandment that Jesus then gives his disciples: ‘Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another’ (John 13.34).

Like the parable of the great pearl, this story also teaches us to understand more about our worth in God’s eyes. We are the pearl that God gives up his all to find; we are the ones who are tired, we are the ones with feet that are dirty from our life journey. ‘What can I do for you?’ asks the Lord. And he washes our feet and welcomes us home.

**Prayer**

Lord of our beginning and our ending:

may we know that we are loved;
may we learn how to stay open to your love;
may we embrace the fullness of life you offer us.

May we learn to live as if now is the time;
may we live in open hearted and generous ways;
may we know where to find comfort in community when we need a safe place.

May we find the courage to love as you loved us;
may we walk where you lead us and trust in your promise to be with us;
may we know deep in our hearts your generous, powerful and tender love
surrounding us, feeding us, and making us whole –
today and always.
**Amen.**

*Taken from* [*https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2019/100-march-april-2019-c/lent-5-passion-sunday/postscript*](https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2019/100-march-april-2019-c/lent-5-passion-sunday/postscript)

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