

Sunday 3rd April 2022

Readings Philippians 3:4b - 14
 John 12:1-8

Reflection

In our reading from Philippians Paul highlights his credentials, his heritage and his history and we see the image of a perfectionist. Paul's confidence came through ticking all the boxes and ticking them well. However, he reveals he now sees that all of that was worth nothing. Through his experience of Jesus and the message of God's grace and love, he has moved on, and he would give everything he has for his love of God as revealed through Jesus.

In our reading from John, we have another expression of the love of God, again offered through a relationship with Jesus, and just as consuming. However, the story of the anointing needs some unravelling to come to this conclusion. The story of the anointing is one of the few stories that features in all four gospels, albeit in different contexts and places and each with a slightly different twist but that is why there are four different gospels. In Mark and Matthew the woman anoints Jesus head whilst in Luke and John the woman anoints his feet, but only in John is the woman named. Luke places the story early in Jesus Ministry, John places it just before Jesus enters Jerusalem, whilst Mark and Matthew place it in Holy Week itself.

Anointing has a long biblical tradition, priests and kings were anointed and these stories may have been inserted in response to the early churches understanding of Jesus sacrificing himself. Only a priest could do this and thus Jesus needed to be anointed before his death. What is used for the anointing is significant. We are told the ointment was held in an alabaster jar, expensive material which would not have been within the means of any but the wealthy. The ointment itself, Luke, Mathew and Mark identify the perfume as Myrrh, again very costly and a reminder of the gift of the Magi at Jesus' birth, John is not as specific, but we are told it was a costly ointment. All this tells us something of the woman, she is wealthy, which make John naming her as Mary of Bethany, the sister of Lazarus, acceptable. In some of the other versions a lazy interpretation of the language has resulted in the idea that the woman was 'a sinner' or of low repute but John does not go down this line.

Feminist Theologian, Elizabeth Fiorenza suggests that the woman, named or otherwise, stands along side Judas and Simon Peter in significance within the story of Jesus. However, whilst we all remember Judas for his betrayal and Simon Peter for his denial, we have forgotten the woman and the pure love that she has shown in her actions. She is, says Elizabeth, undoubtedly a disciple.

What though is really going on here, we cannot know really but Trevor Dennis invites us to imagine one possibility in his story A strange coronation (Imagining God SPCK). In this story we are asked to imagine that Mary, with her sister Marta and her brother Lazarus are on the banks of the Jordan, listening to John the Baptist and watching people being baptised. Ahead of Mary in the crowd is a young man and when it comes his turn to be baptised it seems that he knows John for they greet one another as friends. When the young man emerges from the water it seems as if he looks straight at Mary, and she is startled to experience the feeling of looking into the face of God. It is fleeting and seconds later the young man turns aside for John but then another strange thing happens, and a kingfisher flew down and lands in the young man's hands.

Mary had listened to John's words about the one who was to come after, the one who would be king, and she has the strongest feeling that this young man is the one. As she reflected later, remembering the stories of coronations and kings being taken to the river and anointed she could help thinking that what she had witnessed was part of a coronation, but it was not yet complete. She could not have imagined then that the young man would become a close friend of her family, or the part he might play in her brother's life.

As the years went on Mary waited for the next part of the coronation but nothing happened. Jesus was special, but he was also challenging and the authorities who could have done something were otherwise inclined. The raising of Lazarus compelled Mary to act – she would anoint Jesus if no one else would and so, at a family dinner she took her most precious ointment and anointed Jesus. It might seem a presumptuous act, who was Mary, a sister, a daughter, a follower even yet in her heart something stirred, and she knew.

When it was done it seemed that Jesus had not understood, all he spoke about was his burial, but then the next day he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey like a king. After that everything went wrong, and his enthronement was on a cross. As she stood at the base of the cross Mary once again experienced the sensation of looking into the face of God and knew that she had been a part of something very special.

This story of love is one we are called to echo. We are called to love our brother and our sister, to cry for the world in pain and to give our all for the kingdom of peace.

Song I will give what I have
Listen [here](#)

Suggested hymns

God is love let heaven adore him
Take my life and let it be

With grateful thanks to Trevor Dennis for his inspiration over the years.