

Dorset South and West Circuit
Written Service for 5th Sunday of Lent, 3 April 2022
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Here, in in our own home we continue the journey of Lent:
with the God who loves us, whose tears wash away our fears,
who will not let us go.

Hymn

Just as I am, without one plea but that you died to set me free,
and at your bidding 'Come to me!' O Lamb of God, I come.

Just as I am, though tossed about with many a conflict, many a doubt,
fightings within and fears without, O Lamb of God, I come.

Just as I am! You will receive, will welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve:
because your promise I believe, O Lamb of God, I come.

Just as I am! Your love unknown has broken every barrier down:
now to be yours, yes, yours alone, O Lamb of God, I come.

Just as I am! of that free love the breadth, length, depth and height to prove,
here for a time and then above, O Lamb of God, I come.
Charlotte Elliott (1789-1871)

Prayer

Gracious God, you are so “other”, so “big”, the Eternal One, that it makes me feel small and fleeting and, well, so ordinary. And yet the hymn words give me boldness and peace to relax into your presence just as I am, with no show, no pretence, no need for Sunday best. Here I am. Help me to know your welcome and help me to respond to it with words, movements and feelings of worship and thankfulness. (PAUSE) I hold my hands out to offer you my worship and to receive your touch in my life today. (PAUSE) I close my eyes to help me focus on your unseen presence and to shut out, for a moment, things that distract me. (PAUSE) Meet me in this space, I pray and help me know your forgiveness, your trust in me and your call to follow Christ. (PAUSE) In his name I pray. Amen.

John 12:1-8
Mary Anoints Jesus

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, 'Leave her

alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'



I'm writing this service on 11th March. You're reading it on 3rd April and the world stage will have changed a number of times over that period. However, in the war against Ukraine, there will still be many voices clamouring for attention - the good and the bad, the greedy and the generous, the plotters and the just.

So, too, in this Bible passage there are many voices clamouring for attention – the good and the bad, the greedy and the generous, the plotters and the just.

Lazarus – very recently brought back to life

Martha – serving the food

Mary – extravagant and daring outpouring of love

Judas – after the money

Religious leaders - plotting

Jesus - preparing, waiting, dreading death– enjoying an oasis of calm and welcome with his friends

There are always many voices that clamour for our attention when it comes to the life of faith, when it comes to the place of Jesus Christ, of God in our lives. Voices that pull us away from the radical invitation of Christ. Voices that urge us to move forward and go deeper in our understanding of God's place in our lives. Let's name the clamour and the discordant voices before moving on.....

All the gospels tell of a woman who anoints Jesus with great extravagance. The identity of the woman isn't consistent across the accounts: in John's gospel we know who this Mary is - she is the sister of Lazarus and of Martha. When John is writing his gospel, how does he use this account? Where does he place it in his larger story? What is he trying to tell his readers -you and me?

1. John places this story just after Lazarus has been raised from the dead and just before Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey to begin the last week of his life. So it's sandwiched between Lazarus' death and new life, and the death of Jesus. Death is in the air. Jesus is a marked man and anyone who is connected with him knows this. These are uneasy times, edgy times, painful times, tearful times. Look at the pictures coming out of Ukraine to get a feel of what it's like for death to be in the air.
2. John uses this story to provide an oasis of welcome and love to Jesus at such a dramatic time in his life when the mobs are circling and his days are numbered. Jesus is with friends – friends whom he loves. The very human Jesus is receiving some TLC before the hellish storm that is about to break around him. Maybe pause now to be thankful for the thousands who are opening their homes to give TLC to refugees fleeing Ukraine. Would your home be a place of welcome to others? It's a sobering question, isn't it? It certainly is not the appropriate thing for everyone to do, but it's a sobering question nonetheless.
3. It is in this setting that Mary anoints Jesus' feet with ridiculously expensive perfume – made from the oil of nard, a plant indigenous to India. It's insanely expensive -a year's wages. Her behaviour was over the top in so many ways – we can imagine the astonishment and, even, the embarrassment of the onlookers. Look at the picture -it feels rather embarrassing in its intimacy, don't you think? Over the top?
 - Well, there's the extravagance
 - There's the letting down of her hair in public – a no, no
 - There's touching a man in public – another taboo
 - There's the anointing of his FEET. It was usual to anoint the head –as with kings. The only time feet were anointed was when a person was dead – something that would not have been lost on the onlookers
 - In short, Mary is anointing Jesus before he has died. It's the last thing she can do for him in life and she doesn't care what the cost is to her reputation or her wallet.
4. What is John trying to tell his readers –people like you and me? Well, he uses Mary as an example of what a disciple of Jesus looks like. When we recognize who Jesus is, when we experience his ministry in our lives and the lives of others, the response is to offer him our love and our devotion, and to do this whilst we are able -to seize the moment. Can you relate to this? If so, rejoice. If not, think of what you would give up because of love for your loved ones. Hold that feeling and offer it to God.

Mary's offering of expensive perfume and the outrageous way in which she anointed Jesus foreshadows another outrageous offering : that of Jesus himself on the cross. Today is the 5th Sunday of Lent – Passion Sunday-and we are getting ever nearer to Calvary with its stench of death and horror. The writer of John's gospel asks the question to every generation of readers: what is your response to the offering of Jesus' life on the cross? For we cannot escape the cross, however much we might prefer to do so. Why can't we? Because, however we understand the death of Jesus, we see God's love and God's pain on the cross. And in the crosses of life that we bear, sometimes of our own making, but mostly because of what life throws at us, we are not required to

have on our lips that cry of forsakenness that was on Jesus' lips, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" -although, God alone knows if that cry is echoing around Ukraine, Poland and other countries where refugees have fled to. And yet, in all this pain and doubt and fear, you and I are called to bear witness that in Jesus there is hope, in Jesus there is life, in Jesus we are given a part in the great divine drama of love. However hard it is to do, we are called to bear witness, just as Mary did.

Mary somehow understood that and she responded with generosity and love. This reading is chosen for passion Sunday because it subtly deals with the pain of impending death and the response to the Christ who has already brought life to Mary's brother, Lazarus. Now, says John, the death of Jesus (and his resurrection) brings you, dear reader, something to hold on to; something to hope for; someone to walk beside you. Look at the picture of Mary anointing Jesus' feet and allow God's Spirit to offer you new insights and hearing in the clamour of voices that make up your life. And so may it be that you continue the journey of faith's rich discovery. Amen

Prayers of Intercession

- Pray for those who offer TLC to others -often strangers - at great cost to themselves, both governments and individuals
- Pray for those who persecute others and don't afford them the dignity of being flesh and blood- human beings
- Pray for governments who are mean and restrictive in the help they are willing to offer to those in need
- Pray for women and men of faith and those with no faith, but abundant goodwill, as they serve others
- Pray for the churches in this circuit as we travel through Lent together. Today, we pause at the torture scene which is Calvary -and we wait
- Pray for yourself, those you love and those for whom you have promised to pray. In the name of Christ. Amen

Lord's Prayer

When I survey the wondrous cross,
on which the Prince of Glory died,
my richest gain I count but loss,
and pour contempt on all my pride.

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
that were an offering far too small;
love so amazing, so divine
demands my soul, my life, my all.
Isaac Watts (1674-1748)

Blessing

My God's blessing fill our lives, the blessing of the triune God, the blessing of the suffering God, the blessing of the risen God. Amen.