

Sermon for 13.3.16.

To put the gospel passage this morning from John in context - Jesus had just raised Lazarus from the dead and many who witnessed this miracle believed in him.

According to John, it was after the raising of Lazarus that the chief priests and Pharisees got together and plotted to kill Jesus.

They gave orders that anyone who knew where Jesus was should let them know, so that they might arrest him.

They later plotted to kill Lazarus as well.

So the anointing of Jesus in today's passage is a little like a break - an interlude in the tension that is building all around Jesus.

The plotting, the collusion, the skull doggerly goes on - but just for a brief interlude, Jesus is being ministered to by his friends who give a dinner party, and by Mary who anoints his feet with costly perfume made from a special plant. Anointing is normally done on the head - but Mary's sits at his feet and openly declares the depth of her gratitude and love for him with an extravagant gesture.

Now Judas interrupts the moment of intimacy, via a protest about the cost of the oil -

But the gospel writer alerts the reader as to Judas' insincerity by revealing that Judas didn't really care about the poor because he was himself a thief.

One might say that Judas tried to steal the focus from Jesus by his actions.

Jesus silenced him, "leave her alone" he said. You will always have the poor with you, but you won't always have me.

This whole passage, I believe, reveals the importance of our focus on the present moment and the sacred acts of care and love that we do such for each other in the midst of turmoil.

There are times, when an act of extravagance that fills the house with the fragrance of love and care anoints our soul and can lighten the load.

And I am sure that many of us could recall such special times and acts in our own life experience.

I know from my experience in ministry, such acts of kindness in times of grief or trouble - are never forgotten.

In the parallel passage of today's gospel in Matthew,

Jesus said of the woman who anointed him: *Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.*

So such acts aren't forgotten, and in this story, we see how Jesus understands and experiences the way of human response without allowing distractions to overtake or intimidate.

As we hear in the gospels the responsive love of Jesus was always present. It touched those who were lost, those who laboured and those who were burdened.

It had creative, liberating effects.

It loved people into fulfilment, by supporting and empowering them.

It shifted them beyond their internal inhibitions to flower in their own true being.

This is the responsive love of Jesus that permeated the entire house at the dinner.

Yet he not only gave to others, but as his anointing by Mary reveals he also received from others. And as many of us know the gift of receiving from others with grace can be more difficult than giving graciously.

When we understand something of the holistic intimacy of Jesus, the giving and the receiving, when we steep ourselves in him as Bishop Jonathan encouraged us to do during his last visit, we become part of his experience with him.

The whole act of emersion becomes a personal transformation or conversion experience - and as such it identifies with what St Paul is writing about in his letter to the Philippians that we have heard today.

In the letter Paul recounts the total turnaround in his life. In Paul's terms his conversion was a spiritual and moral "circumcision of the heart."

All the superfluous –the standards, the inhibitions, the judgements, the fears were cut away, discarded.

Paul goes to some lengths to explain the meaning of this.

Over against the mass of privileges and allegiance associated with his former life, he writes, there is placed simply the person of Christ. Knowing Christ Jesus.

Such knowing, Paul believes goes beyond intellectual knowledge to include, experience and deep personal involvement; and it is this that also transforms the subject into the likeness of the one known.

Knowing Christ – living in Christ – means personal involvement with Christ and such knowledge, puts the value of former ties into perspective, so that one can freely, indeed joyfully, let them go.

Next Sunday is Palm Sunday and my prayer for us all for this coming week, is that we have a prayerful, reflective week as we steep ourselves in Christ and prepare to enter Jerusalem and the beginning of the passion with him.

The Lord be with you.