

This is the fifth Saturday evening in lent and we draw closer to the passion of Jesus in Jerusalem.

The gospel story today from John's gospel about the anointing of Jesus, takes place on a Saturday evening at the conclusion of the Sabbath, 6 days before the Passover.

All four gospels write about the anointing of Jesus by a woman, and each gospel has its own interpretation of the event.

Mark and Matthew's gospels describe Jesus being anointed on his head in Bethany two days before Passover at the house of Simon the leper by an unnamed woman; in Matthew's gospel, 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.*

In Luke's gospel, Jesus is anointed on his feet in Galilee in the house of Simon the Pharisee by a sinful woman who wipes his feet with her hair. Whether these accounts describe two different events, or different versions of the same anointing, we don't know –however what we glean from John's gospel today is that the dinner takes place at Bethany, where Lazarus had his home, and that Lazarus is a guest at the dinner, Martha is helping to serve the meal, and Mary is the woman who anoints Jesus feet and wipes them with her hair. Mary uses the very expensive spikenard oil derived, some sources say, from as far East as India and *the entire house is filled with the fragrance of the perfume.*

Now the anointing of a person's feet was not a normal procedure carried out on someone living. It was rather part of the preparations of a corpse for burial.

Theologian Michael Fallon suggests that the writer of John's gospel was aware of the unusual nature of Mary's actions. Fallon suggests that like the high priest, but in a very different way, she too is making an unconscious prophecy. Jesus' words in her defence, when Judas objects citing concern for the poor, make it clear that she is foretelling his burial.¹

Jesus words to Judas, *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,*" are in no sense discouraging concern for the poor. Burial of the dead, however is also a work of mercy and it is on this that our attention is being focused here.

Last week's gospel passage, the parable of the prodigal son and today's passage, the anointing of Jesus, depict and describe matters of the heart.

In both these passages, we hear examples that promote the idea that nothing is to stop heartfelt intentions of goodness being expressed for the betterment of others.

When we look at the parable of the prodigal son, we see that nothing prevented the father from running out to greet his returning son. Not the way of tradition nor the boundaries of the acceptable for older gentlemen. And nothing prevented his forgiveness from becoming a reality - not even the powerful disgust and protest from his elder son.

And Mary in today's gospel story, shows the same courageous determination to anoint Jesus for his coming death and burial despite intimidating objections from Judas.

In my experience in ministry I have been privileged to witness this same heartfelt determination in family members who gather together to be with a loved one who is in their

¹ Michael Fallon, MSC. *The Gospel according to Saint John*, Chevalier Press; Kensington, NSW. 2016. P219

final days or hours and close to death- how they allow no obstacle to prevent them from being there to love their spouse or relative or friend in so many different ways – tending, caring, massaging, whispering - to make the journey from this world to the next – in their love. Their presence is an anointing, a sacrament - a sacred presence of loving intention.

These matters of the heart are described by the apostle Paul in the epistle today as a circumcision of the heart when all the superfluous, that is –the standards, the inhibitions, the judgements, the fears are cut away, discarded.

He cites his own conversion into someone who knows the love of God in 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 person into the likeness of Christ.

In our faith we believe that Jesus has made manifest the love of God in this world and has shown us how we are to respond – loving God with our whole being and loving our neighbour as ourselves. From his teachings we too can be filled with the fragrance of love which wafts through us in body mind and spirit.

At this time of the Lenten Season this is especially a foundational way of beauty to move forward to the pathway that we are now approaching and that will lead us to the Easter Event.

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 his passion anointing him with our loving presence.

The Lord be with you.