

**Morningside          Sermon          7.30pm          3/4/23**

**At the table          Holy Monday**

*John 12:1-11*

It almost comes as something of a shock in the midst of what we see as the brutality of Holy Week, with its overturned tables in the Temple, relentless questioning by the religious leaders, the arrest, beating, condemnation and crucifixion of Jesus, to find this gently domestic and devotional scene at another table.

Jesus will have dined with His friends on many occasions, but this party is special. It's coming up to Passover, but it's not Jesus' presence but the recently raised Lazarus' presence that makes this dinner a special celebration. The recently empty space at the table has been filled again. It's a party to give thanks to the miracle worker Jesus, but also to give thanks for the gift of new life Lazarus has been given.

Whatever you make of the Lazarus resurrection, this is a beautiful scene: fellowship, good food, time to linger at the table, and opportunities to say thank you. I wonder how many times in His ministry Jesus was the recipient of hospitality, placing this pastoral, fellowship, even outreach action at the heart of what Jesus was about. It is something we in the C21st need to remember and reimagine time and again – from coffee mornings to suppers to lunches to Easter treats (if I can get in a little advertising for what we'll be doing here in a few days' time!) In the imagery associated with the kingdom of heaven there is feasting there, and of course on Thursday we will remember the central meal of the New Testament, the Last Supper. We will gather at this Table and remember.

The scene in the home of Lazarus seems idyllic – a portrait of what church fellowship could be. "We yearn for the church to be a warm and inviting place. We long for a church where we gather

around the table to be fed, not only by the bread and the cup, but by the presence of family and friends, and most of all, by the presence of Jesus. This is a place where Jesus is honoured and those who gather are filled with gratitude and love for the gift of new life in Jesus.”<sup>i</sup>

Martha is there, serving. Not servile but serving. Her choice. Don’t pass her over too quickly to look at what Mary did. Martha embodies Jesus understanding of serving. “...if anyone serves Me, the Father will honour...”<sup>ii</sup>

Martha serves the food and drink. Mary chooses to serve in another way. She anoints Jesus with very expensive and exquisite perfume. She lavishes this precious ointment on the feet of Jesus, foreshadowing the lavish love that will soon lead Him to wash His disciples’ feet at before He sits with them at another table. Mary anticipates the command that Jesus will issue to wash one another’s feet.<sup>iii</sup>

It is not without significance that attention is drawn to the two women who have chosen to serve in their different ways. Women by conventional Jewish and religious standards of the day had no business even being at the feast. But there they are, displaying what Jesus says is the epitome of discipleship: service. At the table.

Tables are flat places, where those seated around them can look at each other face to face. Tables are places of encounter. Tables are not always comfortable places at which to be seated. At this table in the home of Lazarus, Martha and Mary the disciples were seated. One of them, Judas, objected to Mary’s form of service. We, along with John the Gospel writer, have the benefit of some hindsight when it comes to Judas. His outburst about the extravagant anointing (which would have compared to a year’s salary for a Palestinian labourer) is not unreasonable. But it was not right, and Jesus explains why this extravagance at the table spoke of something of greater significance: His being anointed for His coming death. I wonder, did some of the traces of the

perfume still cling to Him as He sat at another Table sharing the bread and wine, or as He sweated terribly in Gethsemane, or hung dying on the cross at Calvary, or lay stone-cold dead in the garden tomb?

At the table in Bethany, with Lazarus raised, Martha serving, Mary anointing, Judas (and I would imagine the other disciples too) questioning, Jesus rebuking, and explaining and teaching, and still loving.

Some time ago I talked about *Oslo*, an award-winning play set in the 1990s telling the true story of Norwegian diplomats brokering discussions between the warring Israelis and Palestinians. Oslo is a wonderful and moving work that portrays how real diplomacy works. The play shows us what can happen when women and men on opposite sides of what is perceived as an intractable divide strive to create a shared humanity. The play is inspired by Norwegian diplomat Mona Juul and her husband, Terje Rød-Larsen. Together they coordinated months of top-secret peace negotiations between Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman Yasser Arafat. Their strategy was to provide a comfortable room with a table filled with food and drink as inspiration for finding a connection and perhaps, eventually, a compromise. A table, food, drink, talk. Realised community. Awkwardness and disagreement. Barriers cracking. Hope persistently refusing to be quelled. Serving and explaining and encountering taking place.

At the table of God's love, whether that table is in Bethany as in our reading, or in the Upper Room, or here in Church tonight at Morningside, there is room enough for everyone. The recipients of new life; the ones who are committed to serving; the ones ready to be extravagant with their love; the ones wanting to question, to complain, even to disrupt. In the words of one of the newer hymns in the hymnbook, "For everyone born, a place at the table..." The table, a piece of heaven on earth, with all the challenges and possibilities, the dissonances and delights that

earth brings. A place where all means all in welcome, even those whose views, or behaviour, or presence we might find difficult, even objectionable.

It might remind you of something Desmond Tutu once said: *"We may be surprised at the people we find in heaven. God has a soft spot for sinners. His standards are quite low."*

At the table in Bethany: a dead man alive again; a woman happier in service than in sitting; a woman whose affection is expressed in wild extravagance; a man whose criticisms may have darker motivation; others who are silent. Here at this first-century dinner party we see a microcosm of the modern church. The threat of death and the joy of life sit side by side. The richness of worship and the poverty of the world rub shoulders. The quiet and contemplative disciples sit at table with the social activists. Sometimes the table feels a bit crowded, and the mood slips from gratitude to pious judgementalism.<sup>iv</sup>

And Jesus. Jesus is at that table. As He is at this table, and every table.

As He was in Bethany, let Him be now, the focus of the party, and the focus of this coming Holy Week.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**

---

<sup>i</sup> Nancy A Mikoski, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol 2, p200

<sup>ii</sup> John 12:26

<sup>iii</sup> Gary W Charles, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol 2, p203

<sup>iv</sup> Mikoski, p204