

**Passion***Isaiah 43:16-21; John 12:1-8*

There are few passages in the Bible so packed with beauty, truth and passion than the anointing scene read to us from John's Gospel. We're just a few miles north of Jerusalem, on the other side of the Mount of Olives, in the little village of Bethany. We are in the home of Lazarus, newly returned to life, with his sisters Martha and Mary.

This is a final turning point in Jesus' life where He is locked in to travelling to Jerusalem and to face everything that lies ahead. It is the introduction to the time of Jesus' passion and death. It is a story about passionate extravagance in the action of Mary, a faithful disciple, who devotes herself and all she had to Jesus. with the symbolic anointing of Jesus – a sign of His pending death. It's also a story about Judas Iscariot, the unfaithful disciple who steals from the common purse and will betray Jesus. Both are included in John's story that begins the Passion of Jesus, both the one who is faithful and the one who is not, and their inclusion tells us a great deal about the meaning of the cross and the inclusive nature of God's grace. God is big enough to include those who we find difficult to include, and lets them make their own choices about what is right and what is wrong, and loves them nonetheless.

Jesus comes to stay for dinner with His friends at Bethany. Important turning points in the ministry of Jesus often take place at dinner tables. In a few days' time He will have His Last Supper in an Upper Room in Jerusalem. Mary anoints the feet of Jesus with precious ointment of great cost. Something very costly is about to unfold and the anointing of feet is a clue. Kings and priests were anointed on the head, and guests were lavished with perfume on the upper body. In preparing a body for burial the anointing began with the hands and feet. This precious ointment, this

passionate action of extravagant love, heightens attention to the great cost Jesus will soon bear in His body. The anointing of Jesus' feet anticipates His burial and the visit of the women to the tomb on resurrection morning to complete the care of His body.

Judas, the treasurer of Jesus' mission, objects to Mary's passionate extravagance. Like many who betray, Judas appears to be concerned for others, but in truth he is concerned only for himself. Loyalty to another, even to Jesus, is often limited to our own self-interests and selfish motives. Few things are more painful, more costly in human terms, than the betrayal of loyalty, which is what happens between Judas and Jesus.

A writer tells the story of the Church's ministry in the middle of the C19th to the seafarers on the docks of London. It was a desperate time. The industrial revolution and the mass production of manufactured goods were placing an enormous burden on the British shipping industry. Colonists in the Empire were anxious to receive boatloads of comfort and familiarity from home.

Being a dockworker was a dangerous vocation. A careless moment of inattention or a simple misstep could cause severe injury and often death. Seafarers working on the ships would be gone for months at a time, and one never knew when one might be taking their final sailing. Areas around the docks were filled with widows and orphans. Poverty and disease was rife.

In the midst of all this there were beautiful churches adorned with great art and breathtaking stained glass. No expense was spared to provide organs and support choirs. Anglican liturgical vestments were lavish, much grander than in the churches in wealthier areas. It was all very costly ointment.

But there were soup kitchens too, and church-run schools for the orphans. There were societies for the support of the widows. There were social justice ministries around every corner. These beautiful churches reached out to, 'the poor that (we) have always with (us).'

In the dismal surroundings of the London docks, if the people were going to have any beauty in their lives, that was free, it was going to have to be at the church. If the people were going to see any great art, it was going to have to be in the Church. If they were going to hear any beautiful music, or hear preaching that would stir them or comfort them, it was going to be in the Church. If the people were going to be anointed with God's beauty, as well as be fed, educated, healed and ministered to in their desperate neighbourhoods, it was going to be through the Church. People in the most desperate situations are some times helped by acts of kindness and signs of beauty. Imagine what would have been missed if kindness was only utilitarian?

In our church, nearly every Sunday, we send out flowers. Time and again that little kindness, made possible by the generosity of donors and flower arrangers and flower deliverers, brings a mindful beauty to someone. They've been remembered. They have something beautiful to place in their homes from God's home. And it may not last forever, but it's a little snapshot of God's beautiful grace and passion for His people.

How faith touches the souls of people is many and varied. Of course there should be hands-on, practical, financial and in-kind support for people in need. Every week money is donated to our Church, and some of it will go to support people in this country and around the world whose needs are almost unimaginable. Every week the boxes in the corridor outside the sanctuary are filled with food and clothing and other things to provide the very practical need that people will need. Thank you for that. Thank you for your kindness and generosity. People will see God in this kind of practical kindness.

Sometimes people's needs are not physical but spiritual. The person who needs to come into this space to find that moment's peace, away from the cares and concerns for their lives, where they can hear words in prayers and sermons that might help them see into their own lives and

understand something of what is going on. Or be cradled in this beautiful space, where thousands have over the years, held they feel in the hands of God. Or be lifted up by music and in a time of numbing ugliness in our world hear something that lifts their spirits.

Last week was the South Morningside Primary School Easter Assembly. We heard about the story of Easter, and the many traditions from around the world. There are Muslim families in the school and the Festival of Eid, following Ramadan, is being celebrated, and we heard about that story too, remembering the vital importance in a multi-faith school, and a multi-faith church, to learn about and respect people from other traditions and faith families. And we thought about Spring, and the blossom and trees and flowers that even in a frightening world still come to us, whatever is happening in the war-torn regions, or the disgracefully ravaged stock exchange economic conflict caused by selfishness and greed. One of the Primary Four children after the service noticed that every bright colour the children were wearing was reflected in the stained glass windows around the church. People start counting windowpanes in stained glass during services at a very early age. But he noticed that and made the connection between what people did to beautify this sanctuary decades ago, and what the children were wearing last week to bring colour to their school assembly. "And", he said, "when we go away, all that colour is still here in the Church." Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings indeed.

On Passion Sunday, as we think about Jesus preparing for that final journey to Jerusalem, we note the extravagant domestic passion and generosity of Mary, anointing her Lord and her Friend. The ointment/oil could have been spent on something else, but Mary decided she wanted to do something beautiful, and she did. Mary of Bethany, and so many like her through the centuries, show the passion of their faith and love by reminding us through their sacrificial gifts of the extravagant, passionate love of God.

Practical things – yes – absolutely – a must as we demonstrate our faith can help and heal and feed and nurture and include. But beautiful things too – even in our scarred and frightened world – where even for a brief hour we need something to help us breathe, and wonder, and be made glad, by the music of a familiar hymn, or a solo violinist, our flowers by the communion table, or the reading of a young person, or the spacious beauty of this sanctuary, or the welcome and kindness in a hall after the service. I’m passionate about these little signs of beauty, for in their smallness, when added up, they reveal the mosaic of God’s love and passion for His world, and for us.

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

**Amen**