The Fifth Sunday of Lent – 6 April 2025

Message – practicing non-judgement

Creator, Redeemer, Giver of New Life, open our hearts and minds to see others and you see them. **Amen.**

We have reached the point in Lent where we now look firmly towards Jesus' crucifixion. We are now entering the season that is known as Passiontide, when we remember the last week before Jesus' death in detail.

The passage that precedes today's gospel from John is a description of the Jewish council's decision to put Jesus to death. This event is not recounted in the other gospels. A few scholars think this trial of Jesus in absentia is a later story. However, there is no conflict with what we are told in the other gospels. The rising sense of conflict with the authorities in the other gospels fits with the council having, at the very least, discussed the challenge that Jesus appeared to be to their arrangements with the Romans.

The lack of overlap in stories between John's gospel and the others is at times challenging. It makes us constantly curious as to how the stories fit together. When it comes to historicity, there is a case to be made for giving priority to John's gospel. We can see in the other gospels that the stories are moved about to emphasise particular themes.

Our notion that the ministry of Jesus was three years long primarily comes from John's gospel where there is clear mention of three Passovers. Scholars have tried to show the same from the other gospels but it is less than convincing as there are no clear markers of time.

Ultimately, there is no way of knowing which is most historically correct. However, we cannot assume that just because there are three of them, it is always John who is diverging from historical fact.

Many of you will be aware that there are stories of anointing in all four gospels. Unusually, here we have a story in John's gospel that appears to recount the same event that Matthew and Mark recount. It is Luke who is the odd one out. Luke's anointing story is of a woman, who has been forgiven much, washing Jesus' feet with her tears, wiping them dry with her hair and pouring ointment on them.

The point made is the contrast between the gratitude and honour that she has shown Jesus and with what is verging on disrespect from his host. Though there are some points of similarity, the differences in Luke's version are significant and one needs a lot of creativity to explain why Luke would have made so many changes.

The simpler solution is that there were two incidents. It is quite possible that Mary is remembering the former incident and expressing her similar gratitude after Jesus had raised Lazarus form the dead. There is also the possibility of transfer of details between the two similar incidents as they are retold in the early church.

In the second account of Jesus's anointing, by Mary's, focus is on preparing Jesus for his death. The perfume used, for which we have a different word, was often used in the preparation of bodies for burial to disguise the smell of the rotting corpse.

Burials were often extravagant affairs and many different

spices and ointments were used, depending on what the mourners could afford.

It is noted that Mathew and Mark say that Jesus head was anointed where John's gospel says that it was his feet. Given the large quantity of oil, about a third of a litre, there was plenty of oil for both of these to be true.

In Matthew and Mark, the image is of Jesus being anointed as a king. It is thought that John's use of feet was a way of referring to the whole body. The use of the word then becomes an anticipation of Jesus washing the disciples' feet.

John's gospel is later than the others, so our best scholarly guess is that the audience that it was written for already had one of the other gospels. John's gospel is therefore telling the good news in a way that enriches and deepens our faith. The events have been reflected upon and we are being invited to see more in the story.

Reflecting on this incident and the response to it, I find myself ill at ease with how Judas is described in John's version. If we think back to the Sundays before Lent and the reading of Luke's sermon on the plain, it is hard to see this account as a living out of a non-judgement attitude. Particularly given Mark says it was some of those who were present and Matthew says it was the disciples who were angry at this extravagant gesture.

It is perhaps that John wants to contrast the behaviour of Caiaphas and Judas with that of the many Judeans who chose to follow Jesus, who to varying degrees believed in Jesus and the good news that he brought.

Nonetheless, I remain uncomfortable with the attribution of

a motive that could only have been known to Judas himself. We all make such judgements at times, which is a failure to recognise that how another sees the world will not be the same as the way we see the world.

Most of us will have had the experience at some point in our lives of being misunderstood. Sometimes, our actions, which are done out of the best of motives create unintended consequences or fail to convey the message that we intended.

This account from St John's gospel might be viewed as a story of misunderstandings and inaccurate presumptions. Some of those around at the time of the anointing, almost certainly including more than just Judas, were outraged by such an extravagant use of a valuable possession.

Today, we at times feel likewise about some of the things on which we see money spent. An obvious example would be the cost of church buildings. A huge amount of social good could be done with the money that is raised for church buildings.

In reality much of the money that goes to church buildings would not be available for social projects. And, beyond that, a church building is a sacred space that in itself encourages people to think of others and to look beyond themselves. The value of this space or of any church space is very hard to calculate. It is a symbol with great power and meaning.

We need a balance; we need to create sacred space and care for the poor. Jesus's words *'you will always have to poor with you'* seem quite callous but his audience would have filled in the next part from Deuteronomy for themselves:

'Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land.' (Deut 15:11) So, no, Jesus is not inviting you to ignore the poor and needy. Jesus is saying that there are times when other things matter too. A passion for social justice does not preclude the possibility of recognising the value of other things too.

Just as some there misunderstood Mary's intentions and the significance of what she was doing, so to may we misunderstand the genuine desire of people to see resources used to demonstrate that we *Open our hand to the poor and needy neighbour in our land*.

There is much about the story of Judas that should give us pause for thought. This Passiontide, I invite you to try to look upon Judas with compassion. It is not easy, yet I am certain that Jesus managed it.

There are scholars who have noted that Judas seems to have expected a different outcome. Judas seems to have thought that his actions would push Jesus to become the type of messiah that most of Israel expected: the one who would rise up and overthrow the Romans.

The practice of seeing the ambiguity in the story of Judas is good practice for living the life of non-judgement described in the sermon on the plain. We will from time to time hurt one another. If we are to fully reflect the love of God, we need to be gentle and compassionate in our response. If we can avoid passing on our hurt, we will slowly make this community a stronger community that will bless the lives of many far beyond our community. Amen. Amen.