

Celebration in the midst of pain

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 13 March 2016

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Lent 5C

Isaiah 43:16-21 John 12:1-8

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under "News and Events" tab

Lent began in wilderness, open spaces, possibilities, for Jesus and for us. Today's story, of Mary of Bethany anointing Jesus, is told in the shadow of Jerusalem. On the edge of the city, the powers of political and religious domination loom over Jesus and his friends. The possibilities are limited now. The shadows lengthen. The system seems impenetrable.

Yesterday, Clare and I went to see the movie *Spotlight*, which is the story of the Boston Globe's investigative reporters uncovering the Roman Catholic Church's decades-long protection of paedophile priests. It portrayed the city of Boston, where more than half the residents were Roman Catholic, observing a vast civil wall of deference and complacency — an inculcated, generations-old bowing down before the power of spiritual and institutional authority. There is one moment when the lead reporter, whose name is Robinson, when he is meeting with an old friend, who is also the PR man for the archbishop (for Archbishop Bernard Law) and he tries to warn Robinson off. And Robinson remarks. *"This is how it happens, isn't it? Guy leans on a guy, and suddenly the whole town just looks the other way."*

The enablers were well-intentioned, well-connected, and they were everywhere. The system of powers and principalities is real. The movie asks us to understand how easy it is to rationalize evil and hope it goes away so that we can get on with our illusions.

Jesus taking on the empire of Rome and the religious authorities also confronts a system of civic and priestly power. Jesus is on the edge of Jerusalem now, waiting to enter the holy city as the prince of Peace, even as others – like Pontius Pilate and other petty rulers – prepare to enter it in military pomp and power. Though Jesus has no weapons or legions behind him, he strikes fear in the heart of every petty ruler, and he is headed toward an awful confrontation with that fear, with those powers that be, naming and confronting a system that denies life to the poor and the marginalised.

And yet, in the midst of this momentum toward a violent end, something beautiful happens - an act of loving friendship.

The Gospel of John interprets this scene of the anointing of Jesus quite differently than the other gospel writers. For Mark and for Matthew, it happened in the house of Simon the leper, and the woman is simply a woman who is not identified. In Luke it took place in the house of one of the Pharisees, and the woman is identified as a sinner. Historically – and erroneously - people have assumed that the woman in Luke’s story was Mary Magdalene (who in a circular argument got the reputation of being a sinner, in particular a prostitute). John, however, places the scene in the house of Jesus’ friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus, in Bethany, near Jerusalem. The woman who does the anointing is Jesus’ friend Mary (whom we call Mary of Bethany, because there were so many Marys in the Gospels).

The writer of John’s gospel deliberately reminds us that this is the same Lazarus whom Jesus raised from the dead. A dinner is prepared for Jesus and his friends. During the meal Mary brings out an expensive jar of perfumed oil and poured it on Jesus’ feet, drying them with her hair. The whole house was filled with the perfume of this expensive ointment, in a beautiful gesture of gratitude and appreciation to the friend who gave her and her sister back their brother Lazarus. It is a sign of how very much these friends love and appreciate Jesus.

This beautiful scene is interrupted by the indignation of Judas: *why waste such costly perfume? It could have been sold for and the money could have been used to feed and clothe the poor.* Of course he is right. It could have been. And that would also have been a good thing. But Mary wanted to show her love for Jesus, to celebrate their friendship. For her this was no waste.

Jesus’ comment and response brings in a new element, the imminence of his own death, and this becomes thus the opening of the passion sequence in John’s gospel, the story we will re-tell over the coming fortnight.

Mary bought it, John has Jesus say, *to anoint his body*. It seems unlikely that this was her intention. But Jesus sees that this will be a perfect use for the rest of this expensive perfume. As for the poor, they will still be around tomorrow, as will also be the need to care for them and to challenge and change the system. This should not be taken as a callous statement on behalf of Jesus - but rather as one that is a matter of fact.

Gestures of friendship and appreciation, moments of celebration in the midst of threat and pain, cannot be measured by ordinary criteria.

This Lent can be a time to commit ourselves anew to deepen our faithfulness to the way of Jesus, and our love for those with whom Jesus identified, the poor. It can also be a time to remember that on this journey, there is always still a place for beauty and celebration even in the midst of grief, poverty, suffering, injustice and conflict. That this is a journey of justice - and this is a journey of joy.

The statement ‘*the poor you shall always have with you*’ has often been used as an excuse not to engage in significant, systemic social change to end hunger and poverty. Jesus was quoting from Deuteronomy ... “*there will never cease to be some in need on the earth...*” (15:11).

But we need to hear the whole verse that Jesus’ hearers would also have known: “*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.*”

Open your hand... Be compassionate!

Hearing the full Deuteronomy text, I believe this story from John implies that it was Mary - with the perfume and the touch, and not Judas - with the speech and the pious-sounding advice, whose response was genuinely compassionate.

The speech by Judas sets up a competitive situation and a closed hand. The action of Mary sets up common connections and an open hand.

Matthew Fox, who has written on creation spirituality, has said:

"Competition isolates, separates and estranges. Compassion unites, makes one and embraces... If we can move from competition to compassion, we will have moved from dull and moralistic and ungrateful and legalistic ways of being ... to celebrative thanking... Celebration, he says, leads to fuller and fuller compassion." (A Spirituality Named Compassion, p. 72)

Compassion and celebration are interconnected.

Jesus concludes in a way that suggests that the place of Christians is with the poor. And how we live that out remains a huge challenge for those of us who, mostly by luck rather than by hard work, skill or intelligence, are economically secure. It is a question that matters to us as individual, and it matters to our life as a congregation.

But just for now, on this day, I want stay with Mary and the moment of celebration in the midst of struggle. And with Matthew Fox's claim that *"Celebration leads to fuller and fuller compassion."* Celebration and justice-making are not opposites! They go hand in hand. In compassion as in celebration, togetherness is empowering. We share our sufferings and our joys. Fox says that celebration and compassion are a forgetting in order to remember. We forget or let go of ego and concerns, exemplified here in Mary's act of extravagance and love, in order to remember the commonality and the connection we share. Then together, we can imagine relief for that suffering. Then together, our compassion takes the form of doing justice.

Early 20th Century anarchist and activist Emma Goldman, loved to dance and to party. Once, when she was at a party, she was approached by a young man who told her that it did not behove an agitator to dance, certainly not with such reckless abandon. He implied or suggested that her frivolity would hurt "the cause". To which she famously replied, *"If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution. A revolution without dancing is not a revolution worth having."*

I think that Jesus and Mary of Bethany, shared that same conviction; to live with passion and compassion in spite of all that is broken in the world...

*Though crosses may loom,
and opponents gather,
though cynics may scoff at our faithfulness
in travelling the Way of Jesus
we still choose to embrace and enjoy
for our own sake, and that of the least,
the healing power of celebration.*

In a Lenten season when questions of suffering and injustice press heavily upon us, let us also make time for celebration and joy and beauty, time to delight in one another, and in the sacred power that connects us and sustains us in all we are called –

to do

and to be.