

Fifth Sunday of Lent 21st March 2010.

Is 43: 16-21; Ps 126; Phil. 3:3-14; John 12: 1-8.

I would like to pick up on Fr Paul's theme of a fortnight ago, in which he spoke about the vulnerability of Jesus' love, which is like a hen with wings pread out over her chicks, She is totally exposed in this caring position. This week, the reading from John's Gospel is about the extravagance of love expressed by Mary. But it also points us to think about the extravagance of God's love in Jesus.

In fact all the readings this morning are themed around extravagant love, either that of God or that of response to God's love.

In the Isaiah reading we are asked to remember the wonderful time when God held back the waters of the Red Sea, *the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters.* (Is 43:16). But as if that wasn't enough for us, we are told that God now plans to top that for us. So Isaiah tells us that while that was pretty marvellous, now we can expect *water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people* (Is 43:20). Like the people of the Middle East we can appreciate the richness of this imagery, we know about draughts and desert and what the lack of water can do to us. So the promise of water is rich with promise of life and growth and total fulfillment. The next verse on from where we left off this morning goes on to say, *Yet you did not call upon me...you have been weary of me, O Israel* (Is 43: 22), and this is where we will pick up an alternative response to God's extravagant love on Good Friday in some of our readings.

In the psalm we responded to the promise in Isaiah with a shout of hurray *then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy* (Ps. 126:2) as we remember all the things God has already done for us, let alone what God promises to do in the future. The next two readings focus on extravagant responses to God's extravagant love for us in Christ, with Paul declaring that *I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ* (Phil.3:8). And then the Gospel account of Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet with the super expensive perfume and the wiping of his feet with her hair.

I sometimes hear people say that they could not believe in a God who killed his own son. Well, that is one way of looking at the whole Passion episode. But here's another way. The God who created us out of love and who made so many attempts to reach out to us and call us back to the loving covenantal relationship where He would be our God and we would be his people, kept on meeting with lack of response. What was left to do? Only come in his own person, it seems, and get alongside us in love and bring us back. There is technical language about redeeming us in this process of bringing us back. I think that we can understand this redemption as God doing all the work to repair the distance that we had made between us. So God reaches out to us in himself, by taking on our flesh in Jesus.

We have forgotten the scandal of this, we hear it said so often. It was brought home to me in a fresh way when my son was having a dinner conversation in Iran with some family members, and one of the women asked him whether it was true that Christians believed that Jesus was God, and when he said Yes, she just about wet herself laughing. Now rather than being outraged at her tacklessness, I think we should appreciate afresh that she is right. Paul knew about trying to explain how crazy this was to others when he wrote to the Corinthians that to the Jews it was scandalous, and laughable to the Gentiles (I Cor. 1:23). To think of an all-powerful, creator God taking on our flesh and becoming an ordinary man in downtown Nazareth? You've got to be joking! Or else, this is such extravagant love that it just blows the mind to think about it.

So how are we to respond to the God-in-man Jesus who *When he came searching for us he was so tired he had to sit down* as one translation of a verse from the Dies Irae puts it, describing Jesus sitting down at the well and sending the disciples off to get food because he was too tired. You know the feeling? And all this effort for the ninety-ninth sheep? Most people would think if you had 99% of your flock you would'd probably be doing OK and could cut your losses. But not God! And what if I were the 100th sheep? I'd be glad that I wasn't just left out there to my fate.

So Mary doesn't respond in the way that Israel has over time by getting weary of Jesus/God, but responds in a totally over-the-top way. Its not exactly our controlled white anglo-saxon-type response. You could smell the perfume all through the house. And the wiping of Jesus' feet with her hair? Again, it can seem way OTT to us.

Why is this story told so close to Holy Week, when the events of Jesus' Passion begin to unfold? Well, Mary's action can be seen as a preparation for the embalming of Jesus' body for burial. It also says something about the vulnerability of extravagant love. Mary goes over the top in expressing her love, and is vulnerable to criticism and ridicule, and she gets some of that as we heard in our reading this morning. God goes over the top in expressing love for us and is vulnerable to terrible suffering and a slow death as a criminal. It doesn't get much more vulnerable than that!

Any act of love for another makes us vulnerable, and I think that is the difference between an act of love and a cold act of charity. There is no vulnerability, no giving of ourselves in "charity" where we can send some money or give a gift which actually costs us very little. If we give something to others that is costly to us, or even give ourselves to another in a loving relationship, we are extremely vulnerable. But love doesn't count the cost. Jesus knew the direction his love for us was taking him at Gethsemane, and he chose to keep going and not withdraw that love.

And we will pick up that story over the next two weeks, and the glorious consequences of that gift of God's love for us, and hopefully reflect on our response to that love.

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