

Passion Sunday

25.03.07

What a Waste

The week of the budget is a good time to look at wasting all that precious ointment as Mary the sister of Lazarus did at a dinner where Jesus was the guest of honour. Judas the chancellor was upset “Why wasn’t that ointment sold and the proceeds redistributed to the poor?”

What led to this wasteful, act on the part of Mary? Why such extravagance and disregard for the economy of the group? Judas was right, it was irresponsible. If it was carbon he’d have told her to plant a lot of trees. If Gordon Brown had really given away a lot of money in lowering the rate of income tax there would have been similar criticism – what about the effect on public services etc.

Our readings today help us to understand what was in Mary’s mind and what led up to this special moment, an ordained moment in history, recorded for us by John.

Isaiah’s promise

Thus says the Lord “I am about to do a new thing, now it springs forth do you not perceive it ... water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert to give drink to my chosen.” God is doing a new thing, but the language is imprecise, colourful and poetic. What does it actually mean?

This is like a headline announcement. Reduction of rate of income tax, adjustments of thresholds, increase in vehicle excise duty ... these are headlines, but what do they mean. Our political leaders do this all the time. Education!

Education! Education! NIHS! Vote for us and we will increase your quality of life. Our responsibility as voters is to ask How? Aspirations are great but if they are not backed up by sound policies, then it is just empty rhetoric.

So it is reasonable to ask “What is the new thing? How is it different from the old thing? What does the language mean? “Rivers in the desert” sounds like he promise of good things to come. Is it? How will we know?

Paul’s vision

Paul understands the new thing and its true worth. He sees that the water in the desert is like the life of Christ in the lives of God’s people. Those who put their trust in Jesus Christ alone.

What Isaiah promises, a poetic image of new life, is delivered by Jesus Christ. Looking down from an aircraft high above the desert I saw in the distance, a winding green stripe in the sandy rocky landscape below. As we drew nearer, I could see that in the middle of the green zone, flowed a wide river. The waters had been used to irrigate the land on either side so that where the water ran, crops flourished and life was sustained.

That’s how Paul sees the life Christ brings in relation to his own life which had every advantage going for his time. Top drawer - the best family, the best schools, every sporting accomplishment, plenty of money, a powerful place in society, exclusive foreign holidays travelling first class, eating in the best restaurants, houses in knightsbridge, many influential friends on high places, oozing privilege and even a seat in the House of Lords, held in esteem by everyone. All this is like sand in the desert compared with

the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

“I have suffered the loss of all things in order to gain Christ ... to possess the righteousness from God based on faith,

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection .. sharing Christ's suffering, becoming like him in death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.”

That is the new thing God will do, give to us the right to become children of God, reconciled to him, finding friendship with him, through faith in Christ. Discovering for ourselves, the power of Christ's resurrection and securing the promise of resurrection from the dead.”

Do you know the full value of your life on earth and all the good things in it? Make a list of the ways in which we are privileged. Do you know the full value of your faith in Christ? Can you say with Paul, it is worthless when set against eternal life which is ours in Christ through faith? Would any of us have thought to say this if Paul hadn't said it first?

Even he had not reached his goal, but leaving what is behind and straining forward, “I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly calling of God in Christ Jesus.”

Mary's wasteful action.

Now we can begin to understand what is behind the act of Mary in wasting all that precious ointment. This is the sister of Lazarus, who had seen her brother die, attended his funeral, laid his body in the tomb and watched as Jesus called him out of the tomb. As she anoints the feet of Jesus, the house is filled with fragrance. That's the effect of true worship. It is pervasive, fills the available space and

overflows even more.

It reflects the wasteful generosity of God, who loves us in spite of ourselves. “Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me ...”

What a waste of a life when Jesus is put to death on a cross. What was that life for? What had happened to all the love shown in healing, making whole, casting out demons, forgiving sins, changing the lives of so many.

What a waste when we think this is God's own son, who pours out his life for undeserving human beings who betray him and turn to attack him and finally, humiliate him in the death of a common criminal.

Can we learn to live wastefully, like Paul, like Mary, like Jesus? Counting this life as less than nothing when compared with the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord?

Lucy Lauener Art Works

The prophets spoke in poetic terms of 'God doing a new thing' (Isaiah 43 16-21) - water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert. I will work from the general to the specific and focus on the way that Mary's 'wasteful' use of costly ointment reflects the overwhelming generosity and grace of God. I will suggest that art works such as yours can be seen prophetically and poetically in raising questions and pointing to something beyond ourselves.