

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 21 MARCH 2010

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John 12: 1-8

"Lent – Courageous Self-examination"

1. Refreshing the fragrance of love

John retells this story in John 12: 1-8 for his own ancient 1st century Christian community. We read that the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment, which the story reveals is the fragrance of love and insight into the journey of Jesus.

Seventy years after Jesus' life, John intends to keep this fragrance of following Jesus fresh and infectious. The story spreads the odour into his community and flowing on to ourselves as readers! Yet, it reminds us that even in that situation in Jesus' life, only Mary has a sense of the fragrance of love.

Lazarus, Mary, Judas, and others were surrounded by the odour, but were either neutral or reactive to it. They were unable to experience its meaning or its transformative power; even though they had only recently experienced Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead.

This story reminds us that: even when those who experience the exceedingly miraculous, the fragrance of love and the work of God's transforming love can remain odourless and beyond our experience!

In the last book of C S Lewis's Narnia stories, *The Last Battle*, eleven dwarves are catapulted into the new world while they were in a dark stable. In that new world, compared with fruit from the old world, "the freshest grapefruit ... was dull, and the richest oranges were dry, and the most melting pear was hard and woody, and the sweetest wild strawberry was sour".^[1] But when the dwarves were given a glorious feast they just couldn't taste it. They just sat in a huddle facing each other, only believing that they sat in a dark stable barn. When Lucy tried to get them to smell the fragrance of fresh flowers, they accused her of shoving filthy stable-litter into their faces.^[2]

This illustration from a children's story reminds us what psychoanalysis teaches, that each person, community, and nation inhabits a discourse, as form of stable, like the dwarves; that we have our own personality with its versions of truth, values and ways of seeing ourselves, the world and God.

Lazarus, Mary and Judas may share the same room, and the fragrance surrounds them, but they do not experience it the same way that Jesus and Mary do.

2. John's intention is close to our own Lenten journey of self-examination

John does not share this reading to bring judgement on Lazarus, Mary or Judas. Through this story, he invites us to listen and learn about what is going in here, and what similarities there are in our own life and faith journeys. John's intention is close to our own Lenten journey of self-examination: asking "who am I becoming, in what way is God's transforming love happening in my world."

This is also Brother Ramon's desire, as we read in his prayer in our service. Brother Ramon desires to place himself into this household, to share their underlying values and express their full behaviour. To serve, as Martha did. To allow time to sit and dialogue, like Lazarus. To kneel at Jesus feet in extravagant devotion, with Mary.

And then, Brother Ramon desires a courageous step. An uncommon act, which not all of us take. He wants to genuinely look inward into his own life and personality and his unconscious. To discover what lies within, even if the debris of Judas-like elements, such as being judgmental, envious, addiction to possessions, float in the darker parts of himself.

He is open to undertake the life-altering work that the Enneagram invites us to enter. To start with our familiar, conscious inner world and travel to a new territory, the unconscious parts of ourselves. Something that Judas avoided.

Maybe Judas was like an Enneagram One person: "Average Ones feel the heavy weight of an inner critic"[\[3\]](#), a judging perfectionist mind,

that is relentless in its negative commentary on others and on one's self. The critic has an endless number of rules and expectations for perfection.

The work of the judge ... is so persistent it seems to have a life of its own. It also can feel like the voice of God.[\[4\]](#)

Resentment and an underlying anger live deep within Ones.

Whether it is Judas or ourselves, when we avoid facing our unseen inner life, such avoidance leaves the self or its society in danger of projecting its own unknown aspects onto another person or culture, making them into the stranger.

But we are all inhabited by a stranger, a Judas, unknown to us but influencing us, and that's why Brother Ramon wants to know what else lies within.

Courageous self-examination is vital to ensure that we know what strangers exist within us, individually and as a society, creating anxiety, and fear of the unknown and even making enemies out of others.

3. Self-examination in the household of Lazarus/Johannine community

What can we learn in our text about the learning that had already happened in this household of Lazarus and John's community?

Brother Ramon leaves unsaid that each character has experienced a series of courageous conversations.

We meet Martha, Mary and Lazarus in a few stories in the gospels. In our story they are between deaths. Lazarus had died and was placed in a tomb in the last chapter, deeply upsetting the community and Jesus. Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. Now Jesus, at the end of our story, tells them his time to die is coming.

But let us look at the challenging conversations Martha had with Jesus. Each time we meet her, in 3 stories, she is always identified as "serving". In the two other stories, she is distracted with much

serving (Lk 10.40) envious and angry with her sister (Lk10) and annoyed with Jesus, and objectionable: she objects, in John 11, that a stench will come from the grave where Lazarus lay dead

if they open it. Martha is a carer and a perfectionist, probably an Enneagram Two.

Yet she is moving to more openness. She has one conversation at a time. She expressed how she feels: "Jesus, Mary is not helping me!" She gets herself out into the public space. She is herself. And Jesus loved her as she was, envious, angry, irritable and objectionable.

He engages her feelings respectfully, yet challengingly. Otherwise she would continue to decide things for others, and bully and control. Jesus realises that her inner feelings and values are in conflict.

Unless she engages in dialogue, she will be unable to change her perceptions of the good and the true.

Unlike Judas, however, she puts some of what is inside out there. She does not compromise, avoid, deny or hide.

Jesus says, directly to her: Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things... that is, you just work with too much detail. Simplify your life. Cook and also sit down and reflect!

Lazarus? Well, simply and briefly, he seems invisible. Maybe his challenge is to shift out of his patriarchal identity and ways, and help Martha in the serving?

Judas? A colleague of mine, Brian Smith, once put this beautifully: Judas is the great tragedy of the gospels, loving Jesus, wanting to follow him, but overtaken by his addictions.

In Mark's version of this story, the disciples get angry with the use of expensive ointment. So Judas just expressed what they all thought. There were attempts at honest conversations!

He was right to ask the question about the money: it was a full years wage in those days: today being \$5000 for pensioners or \$50,000 for well-off workers.

But he just did not understand Jesus: Jesus was not about giving to the poor but loving the poor as fellow human beings; being with them and living in a way that they too might realise their full potential as the image of God.

Mary? We are in danger of idealising her. Certainly, using the expensive ointment to anoint the feet and of Jesus and then wiping the feet with her hair are gestures of humility, of love and strong affection.

This act by Mary was probably one of the few public ways of respectfully, but passionately expressing deep love to a male without sexualising it. She is courageous, clear, and maintains boundaries.

My reading of Mary is that she is a romantic, a lover of people and things with the tendency of getting too close. Romantics in the Enneagram can be excessive in both their love of someone and then as energetic in their dislike of another.

Yet, she too has had her own courageous conversations. Rather than allowing her heightened feelings and sensibilities to float in a dream world, a danger of romantics, she is always found sitting with Jesus as a listener and reflector.

Yet because she strongly and deeply feels what is going on unconsciously, she performs this prophetic act. She anoints Jesus feet. One does not anoint the feet of a living person, but of the dead person as part of a ritual for a burial.

The final events of Jesus life, as presented in John 11, are surrounded with superficiality and the threat of Jesus death.

This is a symbolic act, one which sets off a powerful fragrance, and points forward towards a more positive understanding of the events that lie ahead.

4. Conclusion

Here they are in a household in between deaths, betrayals among and within, failures on past occasions and past and present conversations that have equipped them for this moment, and death haunts their leader. Can they see through death and beyond?

God remains with us and our communities, engaging us in conversations through this text and others around us, all part of our richly layered experience.

Through this, God seeks to open our hearts, minds and actions to the fragrance of love; in this is the hidden, mysterious transforming love of God, leading us to live in faithful, hopeful and passionate relationship with our divided selves and the frailty and inconsistency of others.

[1] C S Lewis, *The Last Battle*, 130f.

[2] *Ibid*, 137.

[3] Roxanne Howe-Murphy, *Deep Coaching: Using the Enneagram as a catalyst for profound change*. 139.

[4] *Ibid*, 139.