Sermon for 5th in Lent Year C

Readings: Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8.

i

Chigi is the name of a wealthy Italian banking family. On one famous occasion Chigi entertained Pope Leo to a lavish banquet in his magnificent palazzo near the river Tiber in Rome. Such was Chigi’s incredible wealth they feasted on pheasant tongue and nightingale pie.

After each course of the meal was finished the servants came and cleared the finest gold serving dishes from the table and to the great astonishment of the guests – threw them into the Tiber. “Saves the servants having to wash up,” quipped Chigi, clearly enjoying the moment.

As the fruit was served the servants began to tear down the fine tapestries that clothed the walls from ceiling to floor – only to reveal that this magnificent place of feasting was no more than Chigi’s stable.

I’m sure everyone, including the pope, was duly impressed. But after all the guests had gone home, the servants hauled up the nets from the river which had been placed there before the feast and into which they had apparently thrown away the golden dishes.

Chigi’s show of extravagant devotion to his eminent guest was nothing but that – a show. He had done it for bravado. His generosity and his extravagance had been purely to create an impression.

How different that story is to the story we find in John 12 where Mary gives a ridiculously huge amount of perfume – half a litre is the prosaic and rather clinical translation in my bible – of the ridiculously expensive pure nard worth 300 silver coins.

Mary’s extravagance is not confined to the monetary gift, but she displays an equally emotional extravagance by wiping Jesus’ feet with her hair. This is incredible stuff. Not only does Mary’s love of Jesus prompt her to such monetary generosity, but it also leads her to break social taboos of the time and touch a man who is not her husband with obvious physical affection.

Yet such is the effect Jesus has on people. Martha might have been of more practical use that day in preparing the food, but Mary shows us the devotion of true faith. Jesus has raised her brother Lazarus from the grave on his previous visit to Jerusalem (John 11), now he has returned for what will be his final visit for the Passover (John 11:54) and Mary is bursting to express her gratitude.

Faith in Jesus is personal. Jesus has done for you and your loved ones what he did for Mary and her brother Lazarus – he has died for us on the cross and offered us new life. If you do believe that to be true, that simply demands a response from the depth of your being, an extravagant, unstinting, joyful gratitude. Faith in Jesus should warm your heart – or whatever way you register your deepest and kindest emotions.

To be fair to Martha, not all of us are as free and uninhibited with our emotions as others and perhaps Martha was putting all her gratitude and devotion into preparing the food. My point is that a genuine response to Jesus is like falling in love. It is an experience that should excite you, sweep you away, and satisfy you both emotionally and intellectually. Responses that are half-hearted, or calculated, or just for public show, are not worthy of what Christ has done for you.

ii

Despite the unspecified tension between Euodia and Syntyche in Philippi mentioned just before today’s passage, the Philippian church was one of Paul’s happiest experiences.

The reading we heard today captures Paul in this spirit of joyful thanksgiving for all that the Philippians were doing. Paul’s mission to Philippi may have got off to a perilous start when he and Slias were imprisoned, but their miraculous escape from jail and the conversion of the jailor and his household marked the beginning of a generally happy and rewarding relationship.

Paul writes this letter when he is in prison, not sure whether he will live or die – but he wishes to express his thanks for their parcel of goods which he has received during his incarceration (Phil 4:10-21).

Throughout Philippians, thought to be an amalgam of perhaps three separate letters, Paul keeps coming back to the theme of joy, even in the face of possible death.

Such is Paul’s joy in the Gospel he goes so far as to refer to his Jewish days as a Pharisee, despite his impeccable credentials, as mere rubbish in comparison (Phil 3:8). This would be hurtful to say to Jewish believers, but to his fellow Christians, he can give vent to an emotional outburst and a bit of hyperbolic flourish.

Today’s passage catches this spirit of optimism and joy, as Paul urges his people to rejoice, and again he says, rejoice! (Phil 4:4). He speaks of the peace of God which is “far beyond human understanding” (4v7) which moves him to say that he can be content when he is full and when he is hungry, whether he has too much or too little, for he has the spirit of Christ within him to “face all conditions” (4v13).

I’m sure we all enjoy occasional moments like this when we feel Christ so strongly we are convinced we can take on the world.

So Paul is displaying here a similar overwhelming joy that we have already seen in Mary when she poured the expensive perfume over Jesus’ feet. It is an exhilarating joy which he commends to the Philippians and through Scripture also to us today.

iii

Why is such unreserved devotion called for? Well, because it is only appropriate when considering what God has done for us.

The problem we sometimes face is that of over-familiarity. We know the Holy Week and Easter story so well that they lose some of their impact. It is impossible to live in ecstasy the whole time – and attempts to do so often prove false and delusional and unconvincing. We all recognise that marriage does not keep up the same emotional intensity as the honeymoon, but marriage does, thank God, still know such moments.

Today’s readings are inviting us to remember the stupendous nature of what God has done for us in Christ; let us look upon the cross as if we are looking for the first time. Let us not hold back but offer ourselves without reserve in joyful thanksgiving.

This is also the message of our first reading today from Isaiah.

To have been rescued from oppression and slavery once would be magnificent enough, but God is about to do it a second time, declares Isaiah.

God led the Israelites out of Egypt by dividing the waters of the Red Sea and swallowing up the chasing army of Pharaoh, but he is about to do a similar feat.

If we had read from verse 14 rather than as the lectionary chose, from verse 16, we would have known the context: “To save you I will send an army against Babylon.”

Cyrus the Persian is leading his army against their Babylonian captors in 539BC. The victory of Cyrus will lead to the return of the Jews from Exile and the rebuilding of Jerusalem. This is the “new thing” that Isaiah urges the people to watch. This battle will result in a highway, figuratively speaking, back home across the desert.

The response to these mighty deeds of the Lord should be joyful, unremitting praise. In colourful poetry, Isaiah declares that even jackals and ostriches will praise the Lord – how much more should the people of the Lord sing God’s praises?!

The question for us is how spontaneous and heart-felt are our religious observances? When Mary poured the perfume, the thing uppermost in Judas’ mind was the cost – 10 times what he was prepared to sell Jesus for.

What is uppermost in our minds when we think of Church? How long will the sermon go on? Can we really be bothered to attend on Good Friday and Easter Sunday over the Easter holidays? Isn’t the dawn service a bit too early?

Any calculations like that, and they pass through all of our minds from time to time, are far from worthy for the occasion. Let us mark this coming Easter with the emotional commitment that it deserves.

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