

Monday of Holy Week 2021 John 12:1-11

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ²There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' ⁶(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) ⁷Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'

⁹ When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ¹⁰So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, ¹¹since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.

"You always have the poor with you" says Jesus to Judas when he complains about the extravagance of Mary's perfume being used to anoint his feet. Some people have suggested Jesus is being complacent about poverty. There's even a song called Stand Up for Judas by Leon Rosselson and Roy Bailey that suggests he had the right idea. A lot of Christians would find that idea offensive, but more importantly than my feelings; it completely misses the point of this passage.

The scene is the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus who we know are friends of Jesus. They are close friends, such that Jesus is recorded as weeping when he hears that Lazarus has died and then famously raises him from the dead. And the authorities clearly thought Lazarus was close to Jesus, as they planned to execute him – as if he hadn't been through enough already. In this home setting, Mary gives this precious perfume to Jesus. It is hers to give, and she does it out of love and devotion to her friend. Perhaps there is also a suggestion of worship here too. The key point is that that the gift isn't Judas's to give – he wants to exercise control over something that isn't his, and suppress the generosity of one friend to another. And, according to John, it was all hypocrisy anyway, as he had his fingers in the till. He was syphoning off funds for himself.

But there is also a problem with Jesus' answer: "The poor are always with you" Is that how things have to be? Is Jesus saying we should be resigned to that? For example, there's a verse we no longer sing in All Things Bright and Beautiful:

"The rich man in his castle,
The poor man at his gate,
God made them, high and lowly,
And ordered their estate." Mrs Cecil Frances Alexander (1818-1895)

That suggests that our social standing is ordained by God; we should be content with it.

No! In fact Jesus is quoting from the Old Testament – from Deuteronomy, one of the books of the Law.. *"There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be open-handed towards your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land". (Deut 15:11)*

It is a command to be open-handed, generous in spirit and in action. It is not suggesting complacency at poverty, but a communal obligation to be open-handed and not tight-fisted in the face of a poor neighbour.

This was not just a plea for action by charitably minded individuals – it was the sacred law of an entire community, it was to be the culture of a community, and Jesus reminds them of it.

Why? Why at this point. Well, Jesus is moving towards a very different act of generosity at the end of the week. He will give himself up to arrest, a rigged trial, cruelty and abuse, and finally a terrible execution on the cross. He will do that voluntarily, because he knows that the gift of his life is the way God's love and reconciliation is to be manifested in the world. He will absorb rejection, hate, spite, and even death in the belief that ultimately love can triumph over it all. Offering up his life for the world will be an immeasurable act of generosity, and so he affirms someone else pouring out their most precious gift for him and asks for that spirit to be manifested here with his friends to all.

So, I won't stand up for Judas here, although we will come back to him later in the week. He didn't understand what was going on here. And Jesus isn't calling for the status quo to be maintained; far from it. Instead he calls for a world where everyone is open-handed, where generosity is the hallmark of everyone's thoughts, aspirations and action. That's what the church – the community that claims to follow him – ought to be like.

I wonder what holds us back?