

John 12:1-8: *In Bethany, Mary anoints Jesus' feet with expensive perfume. Judas, however is unimpressed.*

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary 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. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (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.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

The healing power of celebration

In the midst of grief we choose to celebrate,
because it reminds us of hope,
and brings comfort to our broken hearts;
In the midst of poverty we choose to celebrate,
because it speaks of wealth beyond material things,
and gives dignity to our humbled hearts;
In the midst of conflict we choose to celebrate,
because it turns us to peace,
and restores humanity to our angry hearts;
In the midst of suffering we choose to celebrate,
because it lightens our darkness,
and inspires strength in our fragile hearts;
In the midst of injustice we choose to celebrate,
because it defies evil,
and renews determination in our compassionate hearts;
Though crosses may loom, and opponents gather,
though cynics may scoff at the extravagance
of our devotion to you, Jesus,
we still choose to embrace and enjoy
for our own sake, and that of the least,
the healing power of celebration. *(John van de Laar, Sacredise)*

COCU23C Lent 5C Readings

In a rather startling turn, right before Jesus' enters his period of suffering, the Lenten readings move us to a place of joy and celebration. Isaiah promises the exiles a new salvation of God; the psalm celebrates this salvation as it is realised; Paul celebrates the righteousness he has found in Christ, which far surpasses the value of the "goodness" he enjoyed under the law; and Mary celebrates Jesus. This can be quite shocking in the midst of the discipline and confession that usually characterises the Lenten period. But, the message is clear – the journey through the desert is a journey toward life and joy, for it leads us to recognise, and own for ourselves, the truth that Christ brings us salvation – life in all its fullness. Mary, Paul and the people of Israel all received this gift with tremendous joy, and wild expressions of love. This is a challenge to us to allow our faith to be not just of the head, but of the heart, and not just of the way of justice, judgment or righteousness, but also of the way of joy, celebration and appreciation. Although Jesus proclaims Mary's act as a preparation for his burial – with the shadow of the cross looming over this scene – the promise of God's life, and the demonstration that neither evil nor death can extinguish the love of Christ, give cause for celebration even as we prepare to remember the sacrifice.

"All [people] will be called to give an account for everything good thing they beheld in life and did not enjoy." – The Jerusalem Talmud.

Two characteristics of our current world that contribute to injustice and suffering: 1) Inappropriate or extravagant celebration that ignores the cries of the poor, while squandering resources on frivolous and selfish pleasure. This injustice is rife throughout the world. 2) Judgemental asceticism that frowns on all light-hearted, fun and pleasurable experiences. This, too, is rife. However, authentic celebration is a necessary discipline in following Christ, and in the fight against injustice. Poor and suffering communities often use singing, dancing and celebration as a way to rise above their circumstances. As followers of Christ, our witness and work in the world is strengthened when we find ways to celebrate in inclusive, appropriate and life-affirming ways. One of the great challenges of Lent, and of this week's Lectionary, is the call to ensure that our ability to celebrate is not hindered by difficult circumstances or by suffering and sacrifice. When, like Christ, we can embrace celebration and joy as "disciplines" even in the worst of times, we become truly life-giving reflections of God's Reign. What might it mean for our world if we took the call to celebration more seriously?

(Source: John van de Laar, Sacredise)

Psalm 126: *A psalm celebrating the return of exiles to Jerusalem, and asking for God's grace as they seek to rebuild their lives and their homeland.*

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy;

**then it was said among the nations,
"The Lord has done great things for them."**

The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.
Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the Negeb.

May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.

Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

Isaiah 43:16-21: *The God who has saved Israel in the past invites God's people to believe that a new salvation is coming for them in their exile.*

Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild animals will honour me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

Philippians 3:4b-14: *Paul, who has every reason to trust in his goodness under the law, explains why he chooses rather to trust in Christ for his righteousness, and how he commits to continually striving to reach the reward that is promised in Christ.*

Even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than 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 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ,

the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

The Gospel reading occurs in all four Gospels. Mark (14:3-9) and Matthew (26:6-13) tell the story of an unnamed woman who anoints Jesus' head with expensive perfume. The disciples complain about the waste of money, but Jesus replies that "she has done a beautiful thing to me" by preparing his body for burial. Luke's account (7:36-50) is of a "sinful woman" who pours perfume not on Jesus's head but on his feet; Jesus pronounces her sins forgiven. John's story combines elements of these two traditions. The woman is neither unnamed nor a sinner. She is Mary, the sister of Martha, whose brother Lazarus Jesus has raised from the dead (John 11:1-44). The dinner seems to be in honour of Jesus (12:2), to express gratitude for Lazarus's resurrection. Lazarus is present at the dinner (12:2). Mary purchased the perfume to anoint Jesus at his burial but her gratitude compelled her to use the perfume in celebration of Jesus and the life he restored. Mary anoints Jesus's feet rather than his head. Jesus takes up Mary's act of foot washing in his own actions toward his disciples in the following chapter (13:1-20). We do not know where Jesus got the idea to wash his disciples' feet, but in the narrative flow of John's Gospel it seems that Mary's gift affected him deeply. While he does not wash the disciples' feet with expensive perfume as she did, he does take the same posture toward them that Mary had taken toward him. He has taken the extravagant hospitality she offered to him and returned it to the disciples with the further command that they should in turn extend it - not back to him - but to others who are in need of welcome. "*Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another*" (13:34). For we who live on this side of the resurrection, our task is to take the same kind of extravagant hospitality that Mary offered to Jesus and to offer it instead to those most in need of welcome - the poor, the oppressed, the disheartened, the downtrodden. This is the great commandment. This is the extravagance to which we are called.

(Adapted, Robert Williamson Jr, politicaltheology.com)