

Generosity or Waste?

A sermon preached by Revd Dr Mark Butchers at St Peter's Wolvercote on 21st March 2010 (the Fifth Sunday in Lent)

John 12.1-8

1Six 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.'

This is a challenging and perhaps rather perplexing Gospel. It describes the third visit of Jesus to the home of Mary, Martha, Lazarus. During Jesus' first visit (in Luke 10.38-42), Martha is busy in the kitchen, getting annoyed because Mary is sitting at Jesus' feet and not helping her. In Jesus' second visit (John 11), we hear how he raised Lazarus from the dead. And now in today's Gospel, we hear about his third visit, when Mary anoints his feet with perfume. It is immediately preceded by plots against Jesus: the raising of Lazarus seems to have determined the chief priests and Pharisees to try to arrest Jesus. It takes place just 6 days before Passover, in other words at the beginning of the week in which Jesus shared the Last Supper with his disciples and went to his death on the cross. And in today's Gospel, there are lots of hints that his death is near.

The focus of the visit is Mary's action of anointing. Once again Martha is the busy one - she is serving, active, perhaps again annoyed with her sister for not helping her. Mary takes a pound of pure nard. This was an oil which could come from as far away as India; hence it was very expensive. A pound would have been a huge amount. What Mary is about to do is thus an amazingly extravagant and generous gesture. She anoints Jesus' feet, not his head, a first hint of death and burial, as it was the feet of the corpse which were anointed first. Then, quite shockingly for the time, she unties her hair. This was always kept tied back except before your husband and in times of mourning. And she wipes his feet with her hair - a sign of great love and adoration.

Judas is outraged at this seeming waste when there were the poor and hungry to be helped. But Jesus disagrees with him. Just as he praised Mary on his earlier visit for sitting at his feet to learn, so now he approves of what she has done and points to his death and burial: "you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me!"

I don't find this an easy passage; I'm left very torn. I can sympathise with Judas' comment and at the same time I am moved by Mary's amazing love and generosity. The story reminds me of the film 'Babette's Feast'. In that film, a French woman called Babette goes to live with two sisters in a remote Danish village in the 19th century. The whole village has been very influenced and repressed by their pastor, now dead, the father of the sisters. The villagers are very dour; there is little laughter or pleasure; it's all very earnest.

Babette is a cook and she begins to improve the quality of the food the sisters eat, and the quality of the soup they take to the poor - much to the approval of the recipients. Then Babette has a stroke of fortune. She wins the French National Lottery. The sisters think she'll leave them and go back to Paris to open a restaurant. But she doesn't. Instead she chooses to spend the whole amount (a huge sum) on cooking the most amazing meal for the sisters and a dozen of the villagers. She imports the finest food and wine from France and lavishes incredible love and care on this meal.

The meal has a transforming effect upon the community. They experience the most exquisite tastes, they enjoy themselves, they relax, they laugh. Gently the meal brings some of the tension within themselves and between themselves towards healing. It's as though they are given a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, not just the food, but the atmosphere, the fellowship, the love, wholeness and oneness that we hope heaven holds.

It is a profoundly theological film, but one which like today's Gospel leaves me torn and conflicted. Part of me mutters with Judas and with the sour-faced villagers - all that money for one anointing, one meal? Surely, surely, it ought to be given to Christian Aid to give a few more people life before death. Is there not something immoral about not doing that?

And yet on the other hand, I've known Babette's Feast moments, anointing moments, myself. When I was a curate, a colleague, Simon, (far wealthier than I) used to take Hilary and me out for wonderful meals from time to time. They remain not just in my memory but my inner being as special moments when, through Simon, I glimpsed a divine generosity.... and that felt good.

When I was a vicar in Devon, the Exeter Diocese used to organise clergy conferences every 3 years. The first one I went to was held in the freezing cold chalets of Pontins at Paignton, with its rather down-at-heel cafeteria and meals to match. We were booked in there for 3 years later, but suddenly it closed 9 months before we were due to go. Crisis in Diocese - solved by a churchwarden in North Devon, who owned an hotel, offering to host the conference. Well, we really landed on our feet: a classy hotel with a pool, a gym, a ballroom, and excellent food. The whole serendipity experience made us feel valued and affirmed in our ministry as clergy in a way which doing it on the cheap at Pontins never could. I went back to my parishes with a spring in my step, truly renewed and ready to launch in once again. I wasn't alone in that.

Those experiences were for me Babette's Feast moments, anointing moments, when I felt anointed not for death, but into life. They were sustaining, affirming, inspiring, valuing moments and they kept me going long after - and still today they warm me on the inside. And of course the reason they do is exactly the same reason that Judas' voice in me criticises them - they were extravagant, excessive, and superabundant. But is that not the point? God is extravagant, excessive, and superabundant. Heaven is extravagant, excessive and superabundant. It's not a pre-fab on the cheap.

So as you can see, I am left torn in two by today's Gospel. I am convinced that Jesus' ministry was about service to the poor and marginalised. And as his disciples, I believe we are called to do what we can to aid those on the edge. At the same time I think Jesus was right - no matter how hard we work, no matter how much we give, the poor will always be with us - be that because of intractable unjust systems, historic oppressions which will always reverberate down the centuries, or bad personal choices which lead people into a downward spiral into poverty and often leave them stuck there. The poor will always be with us. Yes we should do all we can in material terms to help. But perhaps there are two other things we could be doing as Christians, two things which flow for me out of this morning's Gospel.

The first is to set what we and others of all faiths and none do for those who are poor within the wider context of the worship of God. Ultimately it is only God who can overturn the inequalities we have created; only he can bring about a kingdom in which all are equally valued and all equally wealthy in spiritual terms. We can't, but he can. Mary's anointing of Jesus is an act of love and devotion, but it is also a symbolic act of worship, a reminder that however much we are called to help the poor, we are also called to worship God, who alone can ultimately bring about their salvation and healing, and ours. Worship and service of others go hand in hand.

The other thing is not to get too Judas-critical, too sour-faced, too (dare I say it) Lenten. Allowing ourselves acts of extravagant generosity towards others and allowing ourselves to be extravagantly anointed by others, puts us in touch with something inspirational, mysterious, transformative - something heavenly.

Anointing may seem wasteful, Babette's Feast may seem so too. And done every day in this world, no doubt they would be. But done occasionally, perhaps they're not. They are reminders that there is more to life than bread alone, more than the merely material, pragmatic and utilitarian. They're a little taste of heaven on earth, which touches us in the core of our being and reminds us of how generous God is.

So when it comes your way, enjoy being anointed, don't shy away from it; embrace it thankfully and see God and heaven in it. And when you get the chance, go wild, be daring and let God anoint someone else through you. Amen.