

LENT 5C 03-04-2022 *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Isaiah 43:16-21; Ps 126; Philippians 3:3-14; John 12:1-8

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.'

This week we have had the dubious pleasure of listening to politicians and commentators explaining the Federal Budget. Wherever we might sit on the political spectrum, many of us will admit to some cynicism; here we go again, as a Treasurer announces the spending of eye-watering amounts of money on all sorts of projects and the Opposition does its best to pull it all to pieces. Nothing new to see here. Some members of society will be pleased and grateful for benefits they might receive; others will feel disappointed, perhaps frustrated at what may have been overlooked. You can't please all of the people all of the time.

When Mary poured very expensive ointment over Jesus' feet, the perfume filled the house. It was a beautiful, extravagant gesture of love. Jesus was a family friend, welcome in their home when he had no home of his own; and Jesus had raised Mary's brother Lazarus from the grave. She expressed her deep love and gratitude, knowing that the threat to Jesus' life was real.

But Judas objected.

We are not told in John's gospel how the other disciples reacted to Mary's action; perhaps they were speechless at such extravagance!

Judas, portrayed by the author as moving towards the dark, asked why the perfume wasn't sold and the money given to the poor, instead of wasting it by pouring the whole lot onto Jesus' feet. After all it was worth as much as a year's wages! Think of all the good that money could do!

John tells the reader that Judas had less than pure motives, because he was a thief who stole from the money they shared to buy food for themselves. This is after the author has reminded us that it was Judas who would soon betray Jesus- he really wants us to know that Judas was not to be trusted.

Jesus' responded by telling Judas to leave Mary alone; he understands why she has done such a thing, because she who had sat at his feet to listen and learn from him knew that he was in great danger. Perhaps Mary wondered if this would be the last time she would see Jesus, and the last opportunity she might have to show how much she loved him.

Then Jesus said something that has been misinterpreted many times. He said, "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Some have taken this to mean that there will always be poor people; Jesus said so, so it must be God's will and we don't have to do anything to help them.

But Jesus was quoting from the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 15, which gave instructions to the people of Israel about the sabbatical year. Every seventh year they were to forgive the debts of anyone who owed money or goods. The Law said, "There will be no one in need among you, because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land the Lord is giving you.... if only you will obey the Lord your God by observing this entire commandment."

Further, it says, “Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land.’

In the ideal community God envisaged, nobody would be in debt for long; nobody would be forced to sell themselves into slavery because they could not pay their debts; and nobody would be in need because of the command to be generous.

The commandment is to ‘not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbour.’ So it is acknowledged that there will always be people who find themselves in need, and it is the responsibility of those who are not in need to help them.

Far from saying that we don’t need to help the poor, Jesus is reminding Judas and us that we DO need to do what we can.

The structure of our society, which- it seems to me- is largely considered in terms of an economy by many politicians- is such that there are always ‘the poor’ with us as well. We live in one of the wealthiest countries in the world, and yet we have people living in cars or couch-surfing because there is nowhere they can afford to live.

In this week’s budget there are tax-cuts for some; but very little benefit for people on low wages. Aged care staff are paid low wages and there is only a small one-off payment for them- no pay rise. No increase for those receiving Centrelink payments either.

There is a widening equality gap in this country, and an even wider gap between the wealthiest countries like ours and the rest of the world. Australia is the 10th wealthiest country in a list of about 175; together, those top ten countries own more than 75% of the wealth in the world. I am sure this is not the way God intended us to be.

Being generous to our neighbours and moving toward a society in which there is “no one in need” should be our overarching goals.

But along the way, there are milestones when special acts of generosity, moments of extravagance-in-love, are beautiful and fitting. Burying the dead is one of those moments, and Jesus, Mary perceives, is on the precipice of death. This is no ordinary dinner gathering. This is farewell.

The good news of the Gospel this week is that God calls us toward this personal and communal vision of a generous, wisely structured world — and at the same time blesses each of us, women and men alike, with the wisdom and discernment to follow Mary’s example, opening our hands in ways that honour one another in love and grace.

We stand on the verge of Holy Week. The house is filled with the fragrance of perfume. The hosannas will come, the lamentations will follow, and the promise of Easter morning — that radiant new world, dawning even now, where crying and pain and poverty will be no more — beckons from the other side of the tomb.

The Lord be with you.