

Lent 5C, April 7th, 2019

Readings: Isaiah 43:16-21, Psalm 126, Philippians 3:4-14, John 12:1-11

The Religious Instinct

Introduction

This is the last week before Palm Sunday which serves as the portal for Holy Week. What is really curious about the Gospel reading for today, is this: these past weeks through Lent, we have focused upon Jesus' struggle with what the Bible refers to as the "powers", or using today's language, the institutions that structure society, that shape the world in which we live: sometimes for good but much of the time for ill. But today, we find a reading which appears to leave all that worldly political concern, a reading that seems to suggest that the world is unimportant, that after all, when pressed, it is the "spiritual things" that matter. In other words, having spoken these last weeks of the Temptations, and then, the state (the source of nationalism or jingoism), religion (that divides people rather than unites them) and finally the family, about which Jesus clearly has reservations; we now appear to do a 180 degree turn, from outward concerns to inward ones, from the social and political, to the spiritual. Surely that is the suggestion, the implication, of Mary applying expensive perfume to Jesus' feet – and being praised by Jesus in the process – rather than selling it and giving it to the poor.

Let's do a couple of things here! First, let's begin with experience. Second let's address the reading. Third, let's draw some conclusions about how we mistakenly see the relationship between spirituality (what I call the religious instinct) and social engagement (what I call the prophetic instinct).

Experience

Part and parcel of my conversion was its double layered character. As a young person, my first experience of Jesus Christ, was one where I felt an enormous sense of joy. It was an experience of *being held* regardless of what reversals I might suffer in my life. It was direct, it was candid, it was explicit, it was unambiguous. Some years later, the experience was relived, but different. This time, it was the experience of Jesus as the man of the Kingdom. It was again, direct, candid, explicit and unambiguous, but connected to the kingdom values of justice, of social justice: the values of the Hebrew world of *mispat* and *sedeqah*. So, "in a nutshell" my experience and understanding of Christian faith has always been double-layered: intensely personal, and in the 'same breath' intensely social, even political. The inward and outward worlds, the existential and the social, the religious instinct and the prophetic instinct, have always been closely, intimately connected.

The Gospel

Let's turn to the Gospel! Let's underscore some points!

First, the story itself. Not much time remains for Jesus as he intuitively understands that things are coming to a head: those powers to which we have referred in these past weeks, are conspiring to execute him as a threat.

Second, in this context, John constructs his take on the story of the perfume. And it is different to the interpretations of the other gospels. Let us examine this difference!

Mark (14:3-9) and Matthew (26:6-13) tell the story of an *unnamed* woman who anoints Jesus' head with expensive perfume. When pressed by the disciples about the waste of money, Jesus replies that "she has done a beautiful thing to me" by preparing his body for burial (Mark 14:6; Matthew 26:10). Luke (7:36-50) tells a somewhat different story, within which a *sinful woman* pours perfume

not on Jesus's head, but on his feet. After commenting on her hospitality in contrast to that of Simon the Pharisee, at whose house Jesus was dining, Jesus pronounces her sins forgiven.

John's story combines elements of these two traditions, but interprets the woman's actions in a different way for a different purpose. **In the first instance, the woman who anoints Jesus in this story, is neither unnamed nor a sinner.** She is Mary, the sister of Martha, whose brother Lazarus, Jesus has raised from the dead in the previous chapter (John 11:1-44). It appears that Mary and Martha are hosting the meal in honour of Jesus (12:2), to express gratitude for Lazarus's resurrection. In fact, Lazarus himself is present at the dinner (12:2). This is then a story about gratitude, not as in the other versions, a preparation, an anointing for Jesus' burial. **In the second instance, John has Mary anoint Jesus's feet rather than his head, preserving a tradition similar to that in Luke's Gospel.** But in the context of John's Gospel, the anointing of feet has a very different connotation. In John's Gospel, Mary's anointing of Jesus's feet presages another, more famous foot washing, which Jesus carries out for his disciples in the following chapter (13:1-20). That foot washing, in turn, is followed by Jesus's most important commandment: "Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (13:34). In John's telling, then, Mary's anointing of Jesus's feet enacts a series of radical acts of hospitality extending from Mary to Jesus, then from Jesus to his disciples, and finally, in the commandment to love one another, from his disciples back to the real world.

Conclusions

So what conclusions can we draw from this story, as John tells it?

I think most importantly, there is a close, intimate association between the intense spiritual - religious experience of Mary - as she generously, outrageously generously, perfumes Jesus' feet - and the world-changing hospitality of love and love of hospitality, that her anointing of him leads to. Anointing Jesus is about anointing his work.

Next, this *puts paid once for all* to the sort of nonsense that is heard when people apply the words of Jesus, "the poor you will have with you always", as some sort of proof-text permission or licence, for the fatalistic acceptance of injustice and misery. At no point is this story about philosophical resignation to the tragic realities of social and political life.

Finally, this story that marries the perfume with the hospitable, the religious instinct with the prophetic instinct, tells us that the spiritual is not disengaged from the material. That is not how the Hebrews conceived of things. Western tendencies to see spirituality as detached from the real world is wrong. In fact, what Mary does here in her spiritual moment, is not to flee from the real world at all, but to dig down deeper into the very person and world-view of Jesus: the kingdom. Yes, the poor will always be with us, because of human, social and political vicissitudes, not because God wills it.

