

Sunday, March 17, 2013
Fifth Sunday in Lent
The Rev. Deacon Pete Cornell

Isaiah 43:16-21
Psalm 126
Philippians 3:4b-14
John 12:1-8

Today's propers are the last stop in the Lenten story before we move into the Passion, Death and Resurrection of our Lord over the next two weeks. The author of John has documented the signs that foretell His divine nature among us, and that he is truly the Son of God preparing to die to bring God's love of the world. And this final story in the series takes place in the presence of the benefactor of his last and most dramatic miracle, the raising of his friend Lazarus from the dead. Immediately after restoring life to Lazarus (whose name means "whom God helps"), Jesus will ride into Jerusalem to the cheers of the citizenry (and the consternation of the church and Roman leaders). In fact, Caiaphas the High Priest has predicted that Jesus will come forward during the festival of Passover, and alerted his agents to keep watch for Him.

At this point in his journey, Jesus and the disciples are resting at the home of Lazarus, with his sisters Mary and Martha. In this version of events (which are recorded in all four Gospels) John stresses the fact that Lazarus had joined the meal with Jesus and is eating the meat that was offered. This is a literary construct intended to reinforce the fact that Lazarus was a living human and not a ghost (Luke records the resurrected Jesus eating fish with the disciples). Mary and Martha had sent word when Lazarus fell ill, and Jesus delayed His journey, to arrive at the tomb after Lazarus had been buried for four days. Martha confronts Jesus, challenging that if only he had come, Lazarus would not be dead. Jesus chastises her limited faith, and giving thanks to God, calls for Lazarus to come forth from the tomb. This miracle was witnessed by many, and was probably what was in the minds of the adoring hordes who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem. We can all imagine the sense of gratitude and wonder that would be present in that house. I think the author intends us to see Jesus in this most relaxed scene, with close friends who have nothing but celebration and joy on their minds. Let's think about our own experiences with our loved ones. How many of us have spent time waiting for a doctor to speak to us after a family member or friend has been out of sight for surgery or a test? Even with family surrounding us, we are still in our own bubble of anxiety, feeling powerless to affect the outcome. We pray, we offer each other comforting words, we watch the door or the hallway and the clock on the wall. And what a relief when the doctor or nurse comes and tells us good news. In this context, Mary's actions do not seem so farfetched.

The act of washing feet has been a symbol of hospitality and gracious welcome since earliest civilization. And the dirt from an individual's feet is considered to be insulting in the modern world. Jesus admonished his followers to 'shake the dust from their sandals' at the outskirts of a village that did not welcome their presence. Mary has chosen a very personal symbolic act, to recognize the gratitude of the family toward Jesus. She uses an emollient probably made from spike-nard, an aromatic, perennial herb (*Nardostachys jatamansi*) indigenous to the Himalaya Mountains, which means it

would have been transported over thousands of miles. As the Gospel explains, this was a very expensive offering (it probably approached the wages of a tradesman). And the fact that she used her own hair to wipe them makes it a personal statement of devotion. This tender moment is interrupted by Judas, who criticizes the use of such expensive oil as an expression of the family's gratitude. We also hear the very human assessment of the author that Judas did this solely because he would have preferred that the funds be put into the common purse where he could steal them. Judas skips over the fact that this was a choice of the sister, and was not money that was his to control. Jesus responds with a variation on a teaching from Deuteronomy, where Moses instructs the Israelites that there would always be poor people, and they were to make it part of their duty to God to open their hands to the poor. 'Leave her alone, she bought it....you will always have the poor with you....but you will not always have me' He tells Judas. Some of us today might feel some sympathy with Judas' position on spending on gifts for others. But Jesus seems to setting a precedent that gifts given to truly and honestly express thanksgiving to God are just as valued as gifts that address the needs of the world. The message of God's love for the world that he sent his Son to save us would never allow us to conclude that since we can't eliminate poverty we should devote our treasures to adorning our churches. Remember that Jesus cared for all, from the tax collectors to the beggars, from his persecutors to his disciples.

Lent has been a time of reflection. We have heard teachings about how we live our Christianity; we have been studying the story of our Lord as we re-read the four Gospels; we have denied ourselves pleasures; given up undesirable behaviors; reflected on our devotion to God and practiced repentance. I know my own meditations have included reflections on those I love who have left this world. I've lost some to sudden, unexpected and event violent death. And even more to a death we have had time to prepare for, and maybe one a celebratory end to a wonderful life. It is hard not to link Lent to death, since we know in our cycle of worship that Lent ends with Good Friday and our Lord dead on a cross. You all know I enjoy photography, and the metaphor of a lens came into my reflections as I prepared for today. We examine Holy Week through the lens of our upbringing, our faith, our theology, our being. I think we need to look at the images of this story and recognize the lens and its effect on the picture we see. Just as a poor quality lens or an out of focus camera can spoil the image captured, we need to be careful that we don't loose the rich detail of selfless acts, offered in love of God's grace. The gift given to Lazarus by a caring Son was life itself. The gift offered by Martha was to the glory of God, and did not in any way diminish the work of the disciples in spreading the Good News to the rich and the poor alike.

The image I take away from this story of Mary, Martha, Lazarus, Jesus and Judas is one where the true nature of their characters shine through. Jesus loving Lazarus to life; Mary expressing the gratitude of the sisters and Judas exposing his greedy intentions. I hope this Lent has offered you a meaningful opportunity to sharpen your focus on the abundance we have in God's grace and to use your talents to express your selfless generosity in response to that grace.