

Lent 5 – Year C

An impractical gift of love... an impractical gift of love. That's how the Rev. Whitney Rice, from the diocese of Indianapolis, frames her reflections on our Gospel passage for today. And as I looked at the other scriptures we're given today, and even the Collect, I find "impractical Love" at the heart of each of them.

In these past weeks of Lent, I've been talking about changing the way we look at things, changing our perspective, so that we might – in fact – change our lives. Today's readings, I think, give us the *spirit* to change, the *grace* to carry on with what we know we are called to do.

In the first reading from Isaiah, the prophet reminds the Israelites that this God who speaks to them has delivered them in the past – "who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters." Yes, this God who speaks to them is the one who delivered them in the Exodus, from slavery to the Egyptians. But after giving God's credentials, here is what God then says: "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old." Don't get stuck on your history. God says, "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" In other words, don't look back, but look with me at today and at what is to come! - And then we have this wonderful description that draws us in, that makes our hearts imagine... God says:

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.

The people to whom Isaiah is speaking have been in exile for some time, captured and dispersed. But God does not just come to them and say, "Fear not, I'm going to make everything all right again." Or "Don't worry, it will all work out."

No, God says, “Look! Something new is coming! See, I am acting even now!” God stirs their imaginations and their hearts so that they have the courage and faith, the *heart* to keep on believing, to continue seeing and knowing themselves as the people of God even when they have lost their home and their unity. God gives them a vision of hope.

And that hope is echoed in the Psalm we prayed together. When God restored us, then we were like people who can dream again. Then we dared hope! Then we had *heart* to continue. Then we could again believe that those who sow with tears will reap rejoicing...

All this gives us our insight into today’s gospel passage. We are told by John that it is six days before Passover... and this is THE Passover – the one during which Jesus is crucified. So six days before all these events occur, on his way to Jerusalem, in the midst of the turmoil that his ministry to the poor and outcast, his raising of Lazarus, and his preaching that God’s reign is here among us – on the path to those very difficult days ahead, Jesus and his disciples stop at the house of Lazarus and Mary and Martha. Jesus is, perhaps, saying goodbye – or coming to share his anxiety, or giving himself a chance to breathe before the confrontation that certainly lies ahead. There might have been talk of politics, or the rumblings of the authorities after Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. John doesn’t really tell us much, except that his friends threw a dinner party for him. And in the midst of that, Mary – Mary, who once before sat at Jesus’s feet while her sister Martha was busy being hostess – this same Mary now brings out a jar of nard, precious ointment that cost a year’s pay, and she anoints Jesus’s feet – rubs that oil all over them, in all the creases, between his toes, massaging, soothing those feet that had traveled so far, literally and figuratively. And then she wipes the excess with her hair, now uncovered, unbound ... There are those who say that it’s likely she really anointed Jesus’s head – acknowledging him as priest, prophet, and king – confirming, if you will, the vocation of Jesus he first proclaimed when he read from the prophet Isaiah at the synagogue in Nazareth: “The Lord has anointed me; God has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, sight to the blind...” Whether she anointed his head or his feet, in this anointing, Mary is saying to Jesus, then, Yes – you are the anointed of God. Yes, you heard it right – you are the Beloved.

And then, into this scene filled with Love, Judas interjects the practical, the efficient, the analysis: The oil should have been sold and the money given to the poor. There are mouths to feed! There is work to be done! – And Jesus says, essentially,

leave her alone. – I don't know Greek myself, but apparently the phrase our text gives as, "You always have the poor with you" could just as well be translated as "ALWAYS have the poor with you." Don't ever separate yourselves from the poor! It's not a comment meant to give us a rationale for ignoring the poor, but a commandment to *always* be with the poor...because Jesus won't always be present to us in the flesh, but we will always find him there, perhaps?

Judas is upset because Mary has filled the room with the aroma of her *impractical gift of love*. And it is that gift of love, it is her reminder to Jesus, in that anointing, of the call he heard and answered years before – it is her affirmation that gives Jesus the strength he needs, perhaps, to continue on his journey to Jerusalem and the cross, and the resurrection. There is no doubt that he carries with him the memory of Mary anointing his feet as, days later, he washes the feet of his disciples.

We have all experienced the sensation of not knowing how we will go on. We all know times when it seems we can't go through another sleepless night with a sick child and still get to work in the morning, or don't have the strength of heart to watch as a loved one lingers through the last stages of a disease that will rob them of life. We might know how hard it can be to hold onto hope when the furnace quits and then the heater we use makes the electric bill so high we can't pay it, so that we have no heat at all and what looks like no way out. We do not have to look far to see devastation that seems overwhelming, caused by nature or hatred or greed or just the circumstances of life.

What our Scriptures give us today, though, is a vision of hope. God says through Isaiah, "I am about to do a new thing – now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it? Look!" - and with the psalmist we remember, "When God restored us, we could dream again... Yes, God has been good to us." And in the Gospel, Mary lavishes love and affirmation on Jesus that will carry him through...that will remind him who he is, the anointed and beloved of God.

Sometimes we can see the changes we need to make in our lives, sometimes we can even begin to see the world and one another and ourselves more as God sees us all. But we need *heart* to move. Or we need our *hearts to BE moved*. We need someone to help us imagine what the world COULD look like, with water flowing in the desert. We need someone to inspire us.

When I was considering leaving the Roman Catholic Church to be received into the Episcopal Church, and was considering ordination to the priesthood, I spoke with some of my close “nun” friends. One of them said to me, “Some people will be disappointed in you if you leave. I will be disappointed if you don’t.” She was affirming for me what my heart said, she was anointing my feet with oil... And in the midst of studying for my ordination exams, when I thought perhaps I was too old to cram one more thing into my tiny brain, my younger sister sent me a plaque that read, “She believed she could, so she did.” Those were small things – but they encouraged me to continue. They renewed my spirit, they gave me *heart*.

So someday, the question to ask ourselves may not be, “Have I changed my life today?” – but today, have I given anyone an impractical gift of love? Have I spoken a word of comfort, or encouraged someone with “You can *do* this!” Have I poured oil on someone’s withered hands and rubbed it in, just to be holding and loving their hands?

Holy God, give us always and each day the grace to commit impractical acts of love, to give love – like Mary’s precious oil – unreservedly, to encourage one another on our way. It is the way of the cross, but also the way of Resurrection.

Amen.

- [Isaiah 43:16-21](#)
- [Philippians 3:4b-14](#)
- [John 12:1-8](#)
- [Psalm 126](#)