

MORNING WORSHIP

3rd April 2022
The Fifth Sunday in Lent

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Intercessions by Solveyg Fischer



HOMILY

May the words I speak
And the words we hear
Be your words of life to us.
Amen.

The weeks after I had our first baby were the roughest of my life. I was utterly unprepared and without any support. My husband and I had been completely naive as to what becoming first-time parents would entail.

Now, after baby number four, I know that the days & weeks after the birth of a brand-new little person is a sacred time, a sort of in-between time. Hours and days move at a different speed. The surrounding seems foggy, yet radiant.

Nothing else matters, but at the same time everything is at stake. This time is intense & powerful, as well as vulnerable and extremely fragile. Careful preparation is needed, to make sure that the people at the center of this life event are adequately cared for. I'm not talking about stocking up on nappies or splashing out on the newest pram or gadget. No, what is needed is a healthy mindset, practical support, and someone to be vulnerable with, confide in, and receive whole-hearted care from.

Why am I talking about all this, you might wonder. After all, Christmas seems to be a much more appropriate time to talk about all things babies. Yet here we are, just a few short weeks away from the end of Jesus' life, not the beginning. Today's gospel reading talks about imminent death, not new life. Jesus is sharing a meal with his friends, the thread of pronounced death warrants in the air. John tells us about the plots that were made to kill Jesus, and also Lazarus, who was present there too. Death is in the air, seemingly waiting for its revenge. Only half a chapter earlier Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, but this victory appears to be very fragile indeed.

It hasn't been very often at all, that I have been with a person very near their death, but in each of these moments the feel of the atmosphere, the way time stood still reminded me a lot of those post-partum days... a sacred moment, a sort of in-between time.

I wonder if those who dined with Jesus and Lazarus felt this way too. Did hours and days move at a different speed? Did the surrounding seem foggy, yet radiant? Was it as if nothing else mattered, while at the same time everything was at stake? If it was so, then Jesus too might have needed someone to be vulnerable with, confide in and receive whole-hearted care from. The 12 men he had invested in over the past few years didn't really live up to this calling: instead of empathy, he received from them mainly criticism, alienation, and betrayal.

But then there is Mary.

She cares. Her actions speak louder than everyone else's words. She knows, or intuitively senses, what Jesus needs right now, maybe even better than he himself does. I can imagine that as she anoints Jesus with expensive oil something happens in the room. To some, it might have felt somehow monumental, yet one couldn't really put one's finger on it. Maybe her presence

gave Jesus some reassurance and strength like, let's say, a wise and calm midwife at the side of a birthing mother.

Picturing this scene before my inner eye, I imagine time standing still, and I start to vividly remember the day I last visited my Granddad in hospital. He was very weak and hardly recognised my siblings and me. I was sitting by his bedside, my then only a few months old baby on my lap. Both, my Granddad and my child reached out their hands and locked fingers. For what seemed like an eternity, the two of them held one another's hands and gazed into the eyes of each other as if they were alone in the world. I remember observing them and feeling as if something monumental was happening, that I'm not really able to put into words.

In today's story, we see a woman ministering to Jesus. She steps out of the box, breaks with conventions, becomes active, and does what she feels needs doing. This episode of her attending to Jesus seems to be an important one, as all four gospel writers retell it. And even Jesus leaves no room for speculation as to the importance of her deed by saying, "Leave her alone! She has done a beautiful thing." And further, "Wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her."

It gets a bit confusing if we try to work out what exactly happened that day, as the details the gospel writer share don't quite line up. The oldest accounts, Mark & Matthew, describe an unnamed woman anointing Jesus' head with costly ointments. Luke calls her 'a sinful woman'. He has her anoint Jesus' feet, instead of his head, while at the same time weeping and kissing his feet. And today's reading from John's gospel names her as Mary, the sister of Martha & Lazarus who anoints Jesus' feet. Whichever version we pick - this woman does something, that nobody expected and we are not even told the reasoning behind her doing.

So, how do we begin to think about this story? Let's start with Matthew & Mark, and imagine her anointing Jesus' head we inevitably can make the connection to kings being anointed with oil in the Jewish scriptures - anointed by a priest. Jesus is referred to as the Messiah - which means: The Anointed One - and here is the only instance in each gospel where Jesus receives that anointing. It is bestowed on him not by a priest from a temple, but by a woman. Doesn't this make today's Isaiah passage ring in our heads?

*"Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"*

Or if we follow John, and think of her as Mary, we notice that here, too, she doesn't behave according to the social norms of the time. She, the mistress of the house where the men are having their meal, lowers herself to the role of a slave girl by kneeling and tending to Jesus' feet.

"...I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"

Here is a woman, whose behaviour is criticised by the men in the room, criticised for her outrageous generosity and, in Luke's gospel, for her apparent sinful lifestyle. As the men condemn her, Jesus, the rabbi, resolutely comes to her defence.

"...I am about to do a new thing..." is what Jesus seems to imply.

Maybe this *New Thing* that God is doing happens in these sacred moments, these in-between times. Maybe it happens when someone wholeheartedly cares for another person. Maybe it happens when someone follows the still small voice within them and does something unconventional and unexpected for the sake of love. Maybe there are glimpses of this *new thing* when mothers nurse their little ones, when bitter people in the last days of their lives suddenly soften when the dying man holds his Great-Grandchild's hand. Perhaps this *new thing* springs forth when a housebound receives a visitor that brings their favourite food.

*"Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. (...)
I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert."*

What are those *ways in the wilderness and rivers in the desert*, that Isaiah talks about? Might their seed be sowed when someone takes the time to grieve with a friend the loss of a job or marriage? Or how about, when people pause and celebrate life, in the midst of all sorrow and pain?

*"Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"*

Do you not perceive it?... Isaiah is realistic about our flawed ability (and willingness) to spot God's working in and around us. Just like those men dining with Jesus, I myself am often quick to judge and blind to beauty. Perhaps it pays off to practice noticing the sacred moments in my life and to follow the

prompts to minister to someone - in whatever minor or extravagant way that may be. Because, by defending Mary, Jesus made clear that it doesn't take a priest to anoint the Messiah, that generous love is to be celebrated and that stooping down to take on the role of a servant is a noble thing to do.

Holy week is approaching, the most sacred in-between time, if there ever was one. A strange mix of "Hosanna!" & "Crucify him!", of shared meals & betrayal, of prayers & violence... leading all the way up to the cross.

"I am about to do a new thing!" whispers of Easter morning.

"Do you not perceive it?"

Yes, we will!

Amen.

INTERCESSIONS

"Prayer is a plant, the seed of which is sown in the heart of every Christian. If it is well cultivated and nourished it will produce fruit, but if it is neglected, it will wither and die."

In our services this Lent we are sharing seeds. Let us look well after the treasure of faith by watering our seeds of prayer and make them flourish.

So let us pray with both humility and confidence:

Heavenly Father, we confess that we are not treating the world, you gave us, as we should be. We did not listen, leaders in governance did not listen, only heard what was wanted to be heard. What no one of us could ever imagine happened, we were pushed into a war in the middle of Europe.

The life of Ukraine's people are attacked, they have to flee from the bombing into cellars and bunkers, spending their days in fear. Nevertheless they are fighting, not giving up defending what they are. Lord we pray; keep them under

Your wings and give them strength to keep their hope and confidence- At the same time make way for turning the negotiations for a peaceful solution to success. We hear about tiny little signs of hope, being like seeds. Let them develop sprouts and flourish.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer

Heavenly Father, we pray for all the refugees, especially from Ukraine, where families get separated through this war, but also for all refugees from all over the world. We tend to forget about the other wars, which are more far away from us. Lord, help us to keep all in sight who are refugees, suffering pain, loss or any other damage from war and terror. Let those in civil governance dedicate themselves to justice and peace. Guide us, that we might follow the example of Jesus defending and supporting the poor with compassion and generosity.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer

Heavenly Father, we pray for your church. For all those who preach the Gospel, all churches in the Diocese of Europe, especially our brothers and sisters in Ukraine and Russia, may they be instruments of God's grace and beacons of his love.

We pray that you will inspire and lead our new minister Vinod, our council and all helping hands in our congregation as they serve you. Guide us all, as we seek to follow your Holy Spirit and are working for our future ministry and service here. We pray that all we do and say may draw people to come to know, love and serve you.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer

Lord, we pray for all who are suffering or in pain. We ask for comfort, reassurance, and warmth of your love to heal them.

(silence, personal prayer)

Help us Lord to be more willing to pour out our lives as fragrant offerings of love. We lay our lives before you and ask that we might know that love which does not count the cost

Lord God, as we wait upon you now, as we listen for your voice in the silence of hearts and as we offer our prayers to you we think of those people in our lives who have loved us with a generous love we think of those who like Mary have not counted the cost of what they have given us; of those who given all of themselves to us as Christ gave himself for the world; and we thank you for them - and ask you to bless them and for you to make us like them.

As we go into this week, O God, help us to have a focus, a purpose that is beyond that of just getting by; beyond that of just trying to make it through another week; show us we pray what you would have us do; reveal to us our own personal and unique ministry—and help us to do it.

Grant to us, O Lord, fullness of faith, firmness of hope and fervency of love. For the sake of the gospel may we sit loosely to our wealth and daily embrace you in the poor of the world. As we rejoice in your generosity so may we give ourselves in the service of others; through Christ our Lord.

Amen.