



Sermon by the Right Reverend John R. Stephens

Lent 5 Year C April 3, 2022

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

Episcopal Visit to the Anglican Parish of the Church of the Epiphany, Surrey

It is great to be with you here at Epiphany this morning. Strangely enough this is the first time that I have been in the building. I have been Bishop just over a year but it has taken me a while to get to all the parishes on a Sunday. It is a delight to be able to join you today. I am so grateful for the ministry of Church of the Epiphany over many years but over the past two years as you have tried to work out how to be a parish community while living in a pandemic. It has not been easy and it has taken adjustment after adjustment. Thank you to all of you for what you have done, I am glad that things are starting to change in terms of pandemic restrictions. I also want to thank your Rector, Stephen, for his ministry here and in the Diocese as a whole. Stephen and I were Archdeacons together for many years and I appreciate his gifts, his ministry, his perspective and sometimes even his humour. He is an excellent priest and I know that I don't need to tell you that. It is good to be here with him and with all of you.

When one is the priest or minister or pastor in a small town, one gets to know the people who operate the funeral home fairly well. For when someone dies in a small community it is often the funeral home that makes the call to the clergyperson

seeking someone to officiate at a service, and often times it is for someone unknown to the priest, pastor, rabbi or imam. And so, it may be the first time that you learn more about this person, learn about what they celebrated most in life, what they treasured most, what they experienced, what they endured, what they loved, what they struggled to make sense of, where they found joy, where they wrestled with purpose.

I remember a good few years ago, getting a call that a young woman, a wife, a mother of a young child had died very suddenly. I was told that her family were completely overwhelmed and of course quite shattered.

When I went to visit the family, I knocked gently on the front door. It took a little while for someone to answer. The woman's husband eventually opened the door and invited me in. He was not overly pleased to see me. Well, more to the point there was little emotion seen on his face. His eyes were having trouble focusing on anything it seems and his mind was doing about the same thing. I asked about his wife. I asked about their family and their young son. I asked about the illness that his wife had suffered. I asked about the things that she had loved in life, the things she saw as important. And her husband, well he mostly just stared at his hands. He didn't know what to say or what to do. He didn't want to be planning a funeral, didn't want to be thinking about raising their child on his own, didn't want me there for what it symbolized in terms of his wife's death, didn't want any of this. And who could blame him. This is not where anyone wanted to be. He wasn't too sure about God in all of this, he was not too sure of what he believed or didn't believe at that moment. He just knew that he didn't want to be doing any of this. Silence seemed the only protection from all of this.

Perhaps you have been in this kind of situation. Perhaps it reminds you of some of the scenes we are seeing on our screens coming out of Ukraine. Where the emotions of loss and grief overwhelm and shatter any delusions that life is easy and warm and fuzzy. While good times of course exist, and we cherish them... there are also those dark times too when our fancy words and fancy answers seem a little weak in the face of our reality. It is at times like this where our symbols of the mystery and beauty of the presence of God are needed most, symbols that reveal that we are not alone, that there is light in the darkness.

Lazarus had died and was brought back to life by the gentle words of Jesus calling him to come forward from the tomb that was supposed to be a symbol of finality. *That* Lazarus was at the table with Jesus, along with some close friends and followers. *That* Lazarus who symbolized God's depth of compassion and hope. Martha served everyone. Presumably there was warm conversation celebrating the fact that Lazarus was there. Probably some conversation about what was going on in the world of the time. Very likely some reference to the fact that there was indeed

a dark cloud of fear hanging over them, for influential people were turning against Jesus. But we were told that Mary took a pound of costly perfume. A pound, a generous and expensive amount of perfume, an extravagant amount. She took it out of its carefully crafted container and gently wiped it on Jesus' aching feet. The room filled with this beautiful fragrance, wafting, caressing the room as she slowly covered his feet with it and then wiped it off with her hair. The Bible does not say this, but I am pretty sure that the room was silent as all this was taking place. Perhaps shocked silence, perhaps respectful silence, perhaps outraged silence, perhaps affirming silence, perhaps silence which spoke to the fear and concern. But silence fell as Mary let the scent speak to what was taking place.

I wonder if everyone knew what she was doing as clearly as Jesus seemed to know that she was anointing him for his death. I wonder if everyone understood that this was something that needed doing, to affirm that Jesus was going to die because, because well, because he proclaimed that God's love was greater than hate, that forgiveness was more important than judgment, that indeed grace and mercy should be seen and known, that death was not the end.

You see in the face of Christ's death, Mary did what she might have felt was the only thing possible. While words, as it is for many who have been overwhelmed by grief, while words could not capture the situation or explain it or bring any relief from it, Mary did what seemed the best response in a dreaded time. While she mourned what was to happen, she affirmed that indeed death would not have the final say, that life was God-filled and God-centred. Her statement was to affirm that while she did not have the words to explain her grief or understand her dread, she took out this costly perfume and covered Jesus' feet and the entire room with its sweet odour that named her pain but also pointed to her hope. She used a ridiculous amount of very expensive perfume, an amount revealing her trust in God's expansive gift of grace, a gift that goes well beyond the grave. It is at times like this where our symbols of the mystery and beauty of the presence of God are needed most, symbols that reveal that we are not alone, that there is light in the darkness.

Ted Guzie once wrote: "We use symbols like stones and wedding rings, totems and flags and emblems, precisely because they *work* where logic as a sermon does not. Symbols, not discourses or discussions, do the most effective job of bringing into our awareness the realities of loving and being alive, living and struggling with dying together." This was Mary of long ago and us as we gather now.

But Judas had a different response. Now Judas gets blamed for a lot of things and is often painted as the picture of pure evil and betrayal. I am not quite sure that it is so simple. I see Judas, especially in this scene, as being one who like Mary was having just as much trouble with the fact that Jesus was facing death. It was clear that many

were plotting to take Jesus' life, Judas, perhaps more than anyone else knew this to be the case. And I think that Judas too feared what was going to happen. But for him, he did not want to name his grief, he did not want to anoint Jesus for burial, he did not want to talk about death or resurrection or new life or eternal life. He did not want to dwell on God's forgiveness and expansive grace. He didn't want to talk about any of it at all. We are told that he blurted out, "why was this perfume not sold and the money given to the poor?" It's symbol, what it represented, was not important to Judas.

There are many people in this world like Judas. The ones who say that we have no need or no time or no patience for grief. The ones who say that we have no need to pray or to anoint those who are dying. The ones who say that we have no need to affirm sadness or loss or even God's presence in troubling and grieving holy moments. People who want to deny what it is that we need most in the horrible or painful or grief-filled times of life. Those times when our symbols of the mystery and beauty of the presence of God are needed most desperately, symbols that reveal that we are not alone, that there is light in the darkness.

So, we have Mary, the one who anointed and affirmed her grief and hope and saw that preparation for death was important... and we have Judas, wanting to hide from it, run from it, ignore it. We have ones who seek out God amidst the darkest of times and those who say God has left the room. Those who discover those symbols of the mystery and beauty of the presence of God are needed most desperately, and those who just want to count the cost.

Mary took a pound of incredibly expensive perfume as a symbol, as a sign of God's grace, God's love, God's presence, God's anointing in a dark and desperate time. In this she saw a sacrament of hope. In a few days we will enter Holy Week and we will be invited to share in another symbol that is similar but not the same, the washing of one another's feet as a sign of who is our guide and lord. We will remember the last supper and share bread and wine, again symbols of hope in the desperation, light in the darkness, love conquering hate. We will remember the cross, the tomb and the new life that is to come. I am getting ahead of myself, but we have symbols all around us that point us to the hope that we cherish most in this world that indeed God is with us, God is amongst us, God is here and God is known. Mary made sure that we got that message.

I look back to the young family of many years ago, the one where the mother died, and I worry that I should have been able to do more for them. Offer more words. Take away some pain and shock and fear and worry. Take away the dread of a funeral and life for them in this world. Words can never sort this as Mary discovered long ago. Words alone cannot describe the pain and the gap left by an

incredible depth of love. We must simply know and recognize the signs and symbols of God walking with us, inviting us to new life in this world and the next. Or as Jan Richardson writes, “perceive the circle of grace, to find our place of belonging within it, and to receive the strength the circle holds for us.”¹ Mary did that with a pound of expensive perfume... perhaps you can still know its fragrance even now.

¹ Jan Richardson in *Circle of Grace*, Warton Gospeller Press, Orlando 2015 page xviii