**SERMON FOR PASSION SUNDAY at 8am | 04.04.2022**

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

**I have always had an affinity with Passion Sunday because this was my ‘First Sunday’, here at St James’ in 2009. With almost no time at all to draw breath after my last Sunday in Bradford because the PCC here wanted a new priest in before Easter, I spent Passion Sunday that year trying to make sense of all the new things that faced me when I arrived.**

**And there was in no doubt in my mind that it would all be new. After all I had chosen this passage from Isaiah 43 for my induction with Bishop Stephen Oliver just days before. In the Contemporary English version we read: *So do not worry about what has happened in the past. I, your God, am ready to do new things with you. Look around, can’t you see the new shoots and the new growth. I will make things happen in hard places and bring hope when all seems lost…***

**Well that all sounds well and good – until you come face to face with the scepticism that inevitably happens when new ideas are proposed. Very few of us find change easy and we are all open to conspiracy theories when we are being taken out of our comfort zone. They say that President Putin has never really got over the fall of the Soviet Union and that much of his current paranoia is based on Cold War theories about the West wanting to destroy Holy Mother Russia. The world may have moved on since the days of Kim Filby but the Kremlin is still, apparently, stuck in the past.**

**There is something similar afoot in today’s Gospel. The family of Mary, Martha and Lazarus were exceptionally close – and they had welcomed Jesus into their home long before Lazarus died and was raised from the dead by Jesus. That story is still recalled in pub quizzes with the question: what is the shortest verse in the Bible? *‘Jesus wept’*. On this occasion, Mary is overcome with love for Jesus and she takes the most expensive perfume she can find and pours the lot over Jesus‘ feet. It is the most exotic gesture you can imagine, akin to throwing £50 notes into the wind.**

**But watch what happens. The first reaction is not one of wonderment at her generosity but the self-righteous rebuke of Judas who says that this money would have been better given to the poor.**

**Of course it should – in a perfectly rational and sensible world. It was a luxury of the most outrageous kind and, yes, any number of needy people would have benefitted if it had been given to them.**

**So before we take up St John’s comment about Judas being a thief, let’s look at that reaction. Isn’t it, actually, right? Don’t the poor come first? Isn’t giving to the needy the sensible and right thing to do? And isn’t there a cynical undertone that rightly questioned why Jesus was enjoying what Mary did for him? And why Jesus anyway and not all of those gathered there? Why was he special?**

**As a society we have become deeply sceptical about almost everything. We don’t need the tabloid press (or even LBC) to fuel our sense of thinking we always know what is right - and that we have an entitlement to drag others down if we can, especially if they are trying to do something new.**

**So, on this Passion Sunday, we are faced with a huge challenge: not just Isaiah saying that God *will make new things happen in hard places and hope appear when all seems lost.* On top of all that, here is Jesus demanding that Judas and the rest of the dinner party actually suspend their judgement. They don’t know the whole story and what Mary was doing was both prophetic as well as generous. *Leave her alone, he says; she bought this perfume for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.***

**But, hang on: this wasn’t the day of his burial! What is he talking about? That would come later and the spices at his burial would be provided by people with real money, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. So what is the point of all this?**

**St John tell us that Judas’ argument was spurious because he was a thief so we can discount his objection without too much trouble. What, then, is the deeper point?**

**Surely Jesus is talking to us: he wants us to see in Mary’s gesture something of God’s way of working – always giving without wanting things in return, always encouraging those who are trying their best, always giving people the benefit of the doubt – always being open to the possibility that something new, something different is actually worth considering – and considering slowly before we have decided against whatever the new thing is; giving ideas time – as Nicodemus said later in the Gospel - to see whether it is of God or not.**

**At the PCC meeting on Tuesday I was reflecting on the summary from the session the congregation had with Fr Jim as part of the ‘Time to Dream’ process. And my reflection was to say: all these suggestions are fine - as far as they go – upgrading the website, investing in our young people’s work, putting on occasional evening services and doing more for charity. All those things are good and proper.**

**But is that what Isaiah is talking about? Because there may be something more fundamental: are we yet at the point of welcoming transformative ideas too? Are we truly prepared to be united, gladly accepting different contributions? *For God will provide everything for my chosen people, the people whom I have raised up to serve me. They will see my works and they will come to praise me…***

**As I said to Andy Rider, Dean of Mission for the Stepney Area, who came to see St James’ on Monday, I look back on these last thirteen years since 2009 as something of an ‘interim’ ministry. In the face of the huge challenges that all the churches face, especially in inner cities in the 21st century, we have had to turn ourselves into a very different kind of Church than was the case then. We have had to run very fast just to stay relevant. And it has been very hard work!**

**As we look forward to all that God has in mind for 2024, let Jesus’ affirmation of Mary and her expensive perfume stay with us – and in particular her generosity and her prophetic sense of what was going to happen. In contrast, the person who Jesus has no time for is the cynic, the sceptic – Judas (who also happened to be a thief). Jesus loves Mary because she gave her all, and in that she is, of course, copying Jesus himself. Because Passion Sunday starts the run down to Good Friday and the theme we know so well: *Greater love has no one than those who lay down their lives for their friends…***