

A SERMON IN KING'S COLLEGE CHAPEL

The Penultimate Supper

You might call it the penultimate supper: the story of Jesus sharing a meal at the home of Lazarus, Mary and Martha. It is recorded in the 12th chapter of John's gospel - just as the last supper is recorded in the 13th.

Like all good meals, both occasions involve much more than the sharing of food. There is conversation, disagreement is stated, and people learn about each other. Things move on differently because of what is exchanged. This meal is different, however, because whereas at the Last Supper Jesus is in charge and from his perspective it is 'give, give, give' on this occasion he is a guest and it is 'receive, receive, receive'. As St John writes, 'they gave a meal for him'; a beautiful phrase, if ever there was one.

I have long felt that the parallel between Mary's anointing of Jesus and Jesus washing of his disciples' feet is something that should get more attention. First he was anointed: then he washed. I wonder about Jesus' creativity here. Did he intend to wash feet before Mary anointed him with costly oil, or did the experience of that anointing in some way touch his heart and liberate that powerful and transformative idea? I am inclined to think the second, because I don't believe that Jesus' ministry was the rolling out of some precise mission action plan on his part, but a set of creative responses to situations as they evolved. It was always creative and, yet, also always consistent with his overarching mission which was not only to declare but to express and embody the loving mercy, the transforming grace, of God.

Jesus experienced something profound and grace-filled when he was anointed with the most expensive oil in the house. He was on the receiving end of extravagant, heart-touching kindness. That the gospel includes this moment is surely a surprise to many. Such intimacy! Such vulnerability! This is not an ordinary scriptural story. Paul doesn't tell us about the loving touch he received from those who cared for him after he had been beaten or flogged. He doesn't seem to be bothered about that side of life at all. It's the macho side that matters for him; the fact that he risked the beating, got the beating and survived the beating was what it was all about.

But John the beloved disciple records that before Jesus went on to wash his disciples' feet he himself was given a beautiful, extravagant experience of being deeply loved and profoundly cared for. An experience that affirmed life while it embraced death; that affirmed the terrifying future to come and yet embraced the present moment.

Christianity invites us to embrace the intimacy of physical care and practical love; it calls us to encourage and embolden each other when we face a difficult future; it begs us never to be mean-spirited, and most of all it invites us, when we know we have been loved, to learn the deep lesson of it, and then to find ways of loving others all the more profoundly: to follow Jesus and Mary by expressing and embodying the loving mercy and transforming grace that comes from God, but is made real in human action.

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John 12.1-8

Wednesday of Holy Week, 2019