

Sermon 3 April 2022 Priorities

John 12:1-8

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and the cross. It is important to understand that he knows he has a destiny with the cross. He says to Judas at one point, *'Leave her alone. She did it in preparation for my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but I will not be here with you for much longer.'* He has called in to stay the night with his friends, Martha, Mary and Lazarus. I want to look at the role of three of the participants in this little drama.

Firstly, Martha. While Mary is sitting at the feet of Jesus, Martha is busy preparing and serving the meal. For her, that is her priority; that is how she likes to serve. The point is, we all have our own way of serving, and this will be according to our different personalities and skills. We are blessed in our church with people who roll up their sleeves, literally and figuratively, and cook, clean and carry our physical tasks around the church. They are vital to the running of our church. If we were all like Mary and metaphorically sat at Jesus' feet, nothing would ever get done.

So that brings us to Mary. While Martha is going about her business, Mary is sitting at Jesus' feet, and then she does something quite remarkable. She pours expensive perfume over the feet of Jesus and then wiped his feet with her hair. This is remarkable because it was expensive. I very much doubt that the family was wealthy, so this was some sacrifice Martha made. How important sacrifices are in terms of expressing love. In fact it would be fair to say that if there is no willingness to make sacrifices, then it is reasonable to assume that no relationship will indeed survive. Love lies at the heart of any relationship, sacrifice lies at the heart of love.

There is the rather tragic story of Princess Alice, who was the second daughter of Queen Victoria. She had a four-year-old son whom she loved very much. When he contracted the disease known as 'black diphtheria,' she was devastated. The disease was highly contagious and very deadly. The nurses warned Alice that she must stay away from her son, especially as she didn't enjoy the best health herself.

One day, as Princess Alice stood in a far corner of her son's room, she heard her son whisper to the nurse, 'Why doesn't my mother kiss me any more?' This was more than Alice could bear. She raced to her son's bed, tears streaming down her face, held him in her arms and smothered him in kisses. Princess Alice contracted the disease and in a matter of months, both mother and son had died. That is unconditional love. That is sacrifice.

The third person I want to draw attention to is Judas. When Mary pours the perfume on Jesus' feet, Judas is horrified. He says, *'That perfume was worth a small fortune. It should have been sold and the money given to the poor.'* I have yet to read a commentary on this passage where Judas is not criticised for his approach. In other words, his priorities are wrong. I am certainly not going to portray Judas as a saint, because we know he wasn't but I

think we could cut him a little slack. He is, after all, the treasurer for the group, and as such, is responsible for the finances. The treasurer will always have a different view of finances than the rest of us. When Mary poured the expensive perfume over the feet of Jesus, he saw it in terms of money wasted rather than a loving sacrifice. I think I can understand that. And he did suggest that the money should have been given to the poor, so that's not all bad.

The point with regard to the different approaches of these three people is that they have different priorities. Priorities are important because they determine the decisions we make every day in terms of what we do and how we respond to a wide variety of situations. Our priorities are shaped and moulded by our character and, most importantly, our values. They are also shaped by our experiences, and this is important because we have a chance to learn.

One day we will meet our Maker. I hope that when that happens, we can look him in the eye (figuratively speaking) and say, 'Yes, I have lived my life just as you would have wanted me to live it. I have made people my priority. I have treated people with respect and care. I have valued people and not neglected them.' In the end, that's what really matters.

Some years ago, Dr Elizabeth Kubler-Ross of the University of Chicago, wrote a book called, 'On Death and Dying.' It grew out of her work with terminally ill people. Commenting on their feelings about life as they looked back on it at the moment of death, she writes, '*They saw in a final analysis that there were only two priorities – what you do for others, and love. All those things we think are important, like fame, money prestige and power are insignificant.*'

It's all about priorities.

Rev Warner Wilder