

Sermon 14 April 2024 Priorities

1 Peter 4:10-11 John 12:1-8

I want to look at our Gospel passage, and in particular, three of the participants in this little drama. But first, let's set the scene. Jesus, who is actually not one of the participants we are closely looking at, 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 much longer.'* He has called in to stay with his friends, Martha, Mary and Lazarus.

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 this, 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 tidy. If we were all like Mary and metaphorically sat at Jesus' feet, nothing would ever get done. I cannot underestimate the importance of hospitality in terms of outreach. Jesus himself said, *'When you enter a town, don't move around from home to home. Stay in one place, eating and drinking what they provide you. Don't hesitate to accept hospitality, because those who work deserve their pay.'* Luke 10:7. When you provide hospitality to someone, you are affirming them.

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 wipes his feet with her hair. This is remarkable because it was expensive. I very much doubt that the family were 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 was no willingness to make sacrifices, then it is reasonable to assume that no relationship will indeed survive. Love lies at the heart of any meaningful relationship; sacrifice lies at the heart of love.

The third person in this story I want to draw attention to is Judas. When Mary pours the perfume on Jesus' feet, Judas is horrified: *'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 heavily criticised for his approach. In other words, his priorities are all wrong. I am certainly not going to portray Judas as a saint, because he wasn't but I think we could cut him a little slack. He is, after all, the treasurer of 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 wasted rather than a loving sacrifice. I think I can actually understand that. And he did suggest that the money should have been given to the poor, so that's not all bad, surely.

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 by our experiences, and this is important also because we have a chance to learn. We learn by our mistakes. Hopefully, we are forgiven and so we get another chance.

How often do we regret something we have said or done, and we think, 'I wish I could replay that moment, and I would definitely do it differently.' I know I have, on more than numerous occasions.

Some years ago, there was a film made called, 'Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge.' It is set in the American Civil War, and it is the story of a man about to be hanged. Enemy soldiers march him out to a bridge across Owl Creek. The man's hands and legs are tied, and a rope is attached to the bridge and put around his neck. When everything is ready, the commanding officer barks the order and the man is pushed off the bridge.

Then something remarkable happens. As the man plunges down, the rope breaks and the condemned man plummets into the river below. Down into the water he sinks. As he does, he is suddenly very aware that he is alive and struggles to free his hands and his feet. Miraculously he manages to untie himself.

Realising that he has a second chance at life, the man begins to swim down the river. As he does, he passes a tree branch floating in the river. He is struck by the beauty of the leaves on the tree. Then the man sees a spider spinning a web. He is struck by the beauty of the web, and the tiny drops of water clinging to it like sparkling diamonds. Never has the world looked so beautiful to him.

Suddenly, the soldiers on the bridge began to fire at the man. He fights his way through a hail of bullets and plunges over a small waterfall. Finally, he swims ashore, totally exhausted. He drops to the sand. He sees a flower, crawls over to it and smells it. Everything is so beautiful; it's great to be alive.

Then a bullet whistles through the trees, and the man leaps to his feet and takes off. He runs and runs, until he comes to a house with a white fence around it. The gate swings open mysteriously. The man can't believe his eyes. He is back home, safe. He calls his wife's name and she comes running out of the house, arms outstretched to meet him.

Just as they embrace, the camera takes us back to Owl Creek Bridge. This time, we can't believe our eyes. We see the body of the same man plunge downward with the rope around his neck. We see his body swing back and forth. He is dead.

We are left stunned. What we have watched in terms of his escape was all make-believe. The man had not escaped at all. He merely imagined that he had, in the moment before he plunged to his death. He merely imagined he had been given a second chance at life, a life he saw through new eyes. How differently the man would have lived his new life, if he really had escaped and been given a second chance.

So what is the message here? Why does the author of this story deliberately mislead us, build us up for such a terrible letdown?

I think he is saying to us that the man in the story is us. The difference is that, whereas he didn't get a second chance, we do, albeit in not quite such a similarly drastic way. We have shared his experience and hopefully we have learned something from it. As I said before, apart from anything else, our priorities arise from our experiences.

I would like to think that our experience with our religion, our church, our faith, will lead us to making the welfare and well-being of others a priority in our lives. As Peter says in our first reading, *'Are you called to help others? Do it with all the strength and energy that God supplies.'* Yes, we are certainly called to help others. We know that lies at the heart of our Christian calling.

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 others with respect and care. I have valued people, not abused or neglected them.' In the end, my friends, that's what really matters.

The final word goes to Albert Schweitzer, *'The purpose of human life is to serve, and to show compassion, and the will to serve others.'*