

Sermon 6 April 2025 Priorities

James 2:14-18 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 much longer.'* John 12:7-8. 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, and clean, and carry out 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. Like all things, it is all about finding the right balance.

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, mainly because this perfume was expensive. I very much doubt that the family was wealthy, so this was some sacrifice Mary 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 would indeed survive. Someone said, *'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 say 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 sacrifice. That is unconditional love.

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 attitude. 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 do think we could cut him a little slack here. He is, after all, the treasurer for the group, and as such he is responsible for the finances. The treasurer will always have a slightly 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. Part of me understands that. And he did suggest that the money should have been given to the poor, so that's not all bad. However, having said that, the passage does allude to him being a thief, so perhaps

his motives were not actually that pure. Whatever his motive, the point still stands that we all have different priorities, and these priorities will determine what we say and do.

So if we look at these three people involved in this exchange, we see that they each 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 it means we have a chance to learn.

I want to give an illustration of how priorities can help us make decisions as to what path we take. This actually happened to me just a few days ago. I was faced with two options. One option involved being away for half a day, and it did involve visiting someone who needed a visit. The second option involved spending half a day in my office catching up on work because, for a variety of reasons, I had fallen behind, way behind so that option certainly appealed. So I asked myself, 'What is my priority here?' As soon as I had posed that question to myself, the option became quite clear and it was relatively easy to make that decision. I can't tell you how much asking myself that question helped.

There is, of course, another way of posing that question – 'What would God want me to do here?' If you think about it, it really is the same thing. As I said, our priorities are shaped by our values, and in the end, our values are determined by what we believe, by our faith.

I want to finish by adding one other element to our priorities, and that is people. People should always be our priority, and again, that was very helpful in the decision I had to make. One day we will meet our Maker. I hope that when that day comes, 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 as they faced death, she writes, '*They saw in the 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.

I want to finish by referring to our first reading. We have explored how priorities will determine what we do, what action we take, and I have alluded to the fact that our priorities are inevitably shaped by our faith. James writes, '*But I say, "How can you show me your faith if you don't have good deeds? I will show you my faith by my good deeds."*'