

Lent 5
25/3/2007

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 43:16 - 21
Psalm 26
2 Corinthians 2:14 - 17
John 12:1 - 8

The fragrance of life

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany and had a meal with his friends. *Six days before the Passover* is a small tag line but it signals a gathering storm: the Passion of Christ looms here. The Passover was the feast of freedom and life, but paradoxically it involved death. And paradoxically the images of death and life are at play through the readings today.

The presence of Lazarus at table is pivotal to the scene where Mary of Bethany lavishly anoints Jesus' feet. Earlier Lazarus had died, and four days later Jesus raised him from the dead. The odour of death was well and truly present then and there was no doubt what power was at work in Jesus. The restoration of her brother inspired in Mary an extravagant and prophetic gesture, and we should not underestimate the inclusiveness John shows us by telling her story. Mary is a prophet. Her action showed she knew the significance of what was happening, and what the coming crisis would mean. The tipping point was reached over the raising of Lazarus. Because this many Jews began to follow Jesus. But he could no longer go about openly because the religious aficionados were plotting to kill him, and they also had Lazarus in their sights.

Mary's gesture creates a scene that is very rich and feminine. It is aromatic, intimate and loving. There are no penitential tears to wet the feet, as in Luke. Wiping away the oil with the hair makes it especially sensual, and possibly helped the fragrance permeate the house. There is love and life here and you can almost smell the perfume, but the odour of death lurks as well.

Death came through the mouth of Judas who is portrayed as a pseudo-disciple. His mock concern for the poor is born of profound self-interest. His heart was not filled with a spirit of generosity and freedom. His was a grasping, devouring spirit that masqueraded as the pure faith. In the name of helping the poor, a challenge hard to counter, he was ministering to his own need for self-indulgence. Judas was trapped in death. But Mary's extravagance was born of a love similar to that shown by the Father who received his prodigal son home. She who had known profound death and loss was gifted with life, and her gratitude revealed her inner freedom. Her jar of ointment was worth a year's wages, but its value was no barrier to her offering her deed of love and service. The fragrance of Mary's generosity counters the deathly odour of Judas' hypocrisy.

Jesus counters it in a different way. He challenges Judas' concern for the poor and links the anointing to the rituals surrounding death. But connected as it is to the Passover, this will be a death from which life will come for many. Mary's gesture prefigures the passion in which the fragrance of life will overcome the odour of death.

Leaving aside the conundrum that normally people were anointed on the head, rather than the feet, the meaning of this story is even more multi-layered. Anointing usually signifies designation for high office. Soon after the dinner party, Jesus makes his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Mary's prophetic gesture may represent a royal anointing. This would mean Jesus enters Jerusalem as the anointed one, clothed in a fragrance of royal dignity. And it would mean that it is as anointed king that he dies.

The entry into Jerusalem links with Corinthians where Paul says Christ leads his followers in a triumphal procession through which the fragrance of the knowledge of God is spread. What Paul pictures is something like the apostolic community in liturgical procession celebrating Christ's victory. Such a procession would have an incense bearer at the front, filling the world with a pleasing aroma. This is Christ leading his followers, collaborators who have become permeated by the fragrance of his life-giving self-sacrifice, through whom the aroma of his gift to us spreads over the world. Just as the release of a beautiful perfume lifts the spirit and shifts the mood of all those who come within range, the fragrance of Christ's victory does not leave the world unchanged. Paul's own life of suffering and devotion to God is a manifestation this fragrance. But Paul takes care to show that in connection with what Christ has done, there can be both healing and poisonous effects.

Where the mission advances and the Gospel is communicated to others, those who seek life find life. We know what that means. Just as incense opens the heart to prayer, so are lives opened to the merciful love of God and change takes place. But where people seek death, it brings more death. Paul is speaking of those like Judas who, despite appearances, are imprisoned in a life of self-interest. He mentions peddlers of the word of God. These are people who use the Gospel to support their quest for wealth and admiration. They seek to profit from Christ, and will adulterate or minimise the message if it will increase its capacity for enlarging their stocks of vainglory. Paul knows such people find the idea of self-giving odious. In them the encounter with the call to self-giving love meets deep resistance.

What Paul seeks is collaborators who speak and act in sincerity. This is not moralism. He means people whose lives have experienced a complete reversal of priorities, born of an encounter with divine grace such as he went through. People whose words and deeds are integrated because their lives have become permeated with the merciful love of God. It is from such people, who do not live for themselves, that the fragrance of the knowledge of God is diffused through the world.

Today we stand on the threshold of the Passion. It is a great drama about divine impoverishment and it inspired the story of an extravagant gift born of love beyond telling. The fragrance of this still reaches us and by God's grace it may help us to find the way to true riches. By this means is a people created to bring God praise. We are called to take our place in the procession of collaborators with Christ that moves through the world to spread the knowledge of what we have received through worship and works of justice and compassion.

Today is the second anniversary of the death of Davis McCaughey. I remember the story Jean told me of a minister who said: "Davis, what are you as a minister doing being Master of Ormond College?" Davis replied: "I'm keeping the rumour of God

alive!” It seems to me that a rumour is a bit like a fragrance. It is a presence that is hard to pin down, but raises new possibilities.

Last week Greg Hill our Mission Director spoke of restorative justice. The Mission had a plan for a grand project, which proved beyond our means. Instead it has decided to act in simpler ways, especially in helping women who exit prison. He told us of how the women are often left with no means of transport, and all their worldly goods have to be carried in plastic garbage bags. The Mission is going to provide Met Tickets, and the Senior Citizens Club is going to make bags for the women. Getting home is now possible without risk or exposure. Alongside the bread and wine from our worship that we share with Gods people in prison there is now embodied a new form of practical help.

Because of her prophetic actions Mary of Bethany’s reputation has spread across the world like a pleasant aroma. It still enriches our understanding of Jesus Christ. The world still suffers from the odour of death. But Mary’s message is that it has been transcended by the fragrance of life. And from her we see that there is still room for people who, regardless of the cost, will keep rumours alive, and do beautiful things for God.