

Lent 5C, 21st March, 2010

John 12:1-8

Wastefully Extravagant

I love words, and I'm very visual; and in the dark recesses of my often absurd and visual mind, I can't help but see a word or phrase in pictures. So, when I first heard the phrase "interrogate the text", I couldn't help but see a biblical passage cowering in a corner with dodgy characters, rifles aimed, shooting questions, grilling the suspect text.

In fact, that's how it should be, when we read a passage of Scripture.ⁱ Throw questions at it; grapple with it; don't allow it to sit there and be a mystery; never think your questions are silly, and dig deep for answers. It's about reading the Scriptures intelligently, going beneath the surface, and above all, not passively accepting words and stories at face value, or as "plain reading" or literalistically. The word of God, our holy Scriptures - hasn't been an automated dictation from God. Pen –or reed- has gone to papyrus in the hands of real men and women, writing in ancient languages, living in a culture far different and distant from our own. And those writers –inspired by God – have woven well-crafted stories. We read these ancient texts as best we can, knowing God is speaking to us through them, making sense of what we read within the context –social, religious and literary. And so we probe and question to bring these Scriptures to life in our twenty-first century daily lives.

Well, that's how it was this week in our study groups – probing, questioning; some frustration; more questions than reflections or answers. Good stuff. And entirely necessary for John's Gospel – every detail vibrates with symbolism and meaning. You wouldn't think that this well known Gospel story could be so thoroughly interrogated.

Question: (starting simply) –What's nard?

Answer - Nard is a flowering plant of the Valerian family that grows in the Himalayas. Its rhizomes can be crushed and distilled into an intensely aromatic amber-coloured essential oil, very thick in consistency. Nard oil is used as a perfume, an incense, and a herbal medicineⁱⁱ, and as balm for a corpse. And with its exotic origins it was very expensive – 300 denarii is about a year's wages. In the Old Testament, nard is referred to in the Song of Songs, as a symbol of the intimate and sexual nature of the Bride's love. Sexual intimacy and marriage language are the Bible's favourite metaphors for talking about God's passionate love relationship with us.

Question: Did Mary really know Jesus was going to die? Did she really buy the nard for Jesus' burial?

Answer: There's quite a bit of academic debate about whether Mary knew or not. The simple answer is that we don't absolutely know. The Greek text is unclear, and the English an uncertain translation. It does seem, however, to suggest that Mary was intentional about keeping the nard for the express reason of using it for Jesus' burial.

Whether she fully realised it or not, her action is a symbolic embalming of Jesus. Perhaps, too, John wants to say that it was Jesus who saw something precious in Mary's action and gave it a deeper meaning than what she herself could fully understand."ⁱⁱⁱ

Question: Was Mary Jesus' lover?

Answer: It's not surprising that some scholars have made that conjecture. Mary's behaviour in touching, massaging Jesus' feet with expensive nard, letting down her hair in public, was very sensual, the sort of behaviour associated with the intimacy of a marriage or a sexual relationship. Not acceptable behaviour for a single woman to be seen doing in

public with a man. In earlier times, too, people have mistakenly confused both Mary Magdalene and the unnamed ‘sinful woman of the town’ in Luke’s Gospel (7:36) with this Mary. The good scholars –in the great majority- however, have dismissed the idea of Mary as Jesus’ lover – seeing this scene in terms of the anticipation of Jesus’ death, and the larger message of the extravagance and excessiveness of God's love and mercy made manifest in Christ. A love like that of the love and intimacy found in the marriage union.

Question: Why the feet – don’t the other Gospel stories of a woman anointing Jesus have him anointing his head?

Answer: Anointing with oil on the head was used to prepare a king for being crowned as king. But here the gospel writer is positioning Jesus for impending death. In that ancient world, feet were symbolic of action and movement ahead, as well as there being a symbolism of feet being anointed as one would do for a corpse. Also, it points us ahead to when Jesus will wash his disciples feet.

Last Question: what does it mean “you’ll always have the poor with you”?

Answer: this reminds the disciples that Jesus’ time with them is limited. There is an urgency to respond to Jesus now. Mary gets it. And the poor will still be there to respond to after Jesus is gone.

You might be starting to see that our interrogation of the text invites us to look closer, beneath the surface of this story. This Gospel writer is a masterful storyteller; a real craftsman of writing. The story is positioned to resound with what has come before, what comes after, and with the whole of the Gospel. It’s a “sign story” – pointing towards something more - pointing beyond itself to Jesus and his passionate love. There’s very few words that don’t point to or resonate with his larger themes of the magnificent glory of God, the passionate love of Christ for humankind made known through his death. John does not want us to miss the significance of what is being revealed here about Jesus’ passion.

Jesus is about to step foot into Jerusalem for the Passover. He’ll be dead within the week. The story serves to build up the tension. It is wedged between two bits of narration where we hear the chief priests and Pharisees planning to arrest Jesus, and to put him –and Lazarus- to death. Judas’ role begins to be fleshed out – a thief – the same Greek word used only two chapters earlier to describe those that would come to destroy and kill the shepherd’s sheep. And his false discipleship is pitted against the real discipleship of Mary of Bethany.

And it comes hot on the heels of the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from death, where the stench of Lazarus’ mortal death was feared when the stone to his tomb was rolled away. And here we have a different aroma – the fragrance of nard foretelling death –but Jesus’ death will carry no stench. There will be no rotting remains with Jesus. And this aroma is one of love and devotion –Mary’s for Jesus; Jesus’ for us.

What can this story of the out-pouring of precious nard tell us for our lives today?

There’s a continuation of last week’s theme of excessive, generous love. Last week – the extravagant wasteful love of a father lavishing a welcome on his dissolute son returning home: God the Father’s prodigal love for us. This week the same sort of reckless superabundance of giving, this time lavished on Jesus. Nothing is too great or too costly.

As copious as these demonstrations of love are, they serve to point to the greater lavishness of the gift of Jesus’ own life. “His death will look like a complete waste of a good life. But

this story of Mary tells us differently. Jesus' journey to the cross is the greatest act of self-giving intimate love ever, and out of it God gives us the miracle of new life"^{iv}.

The real mastery of this storytelling is that we can place ourselves in this story, too. The questions with which we interrogate the text, are questions we can aim at ourselves:

What precious gift of self can we humbly and wastefully, generously, lay at Jesus' feet? Do we identify with Mary of Bethany's devotion and discipleship: like Mary, does our relationship with Christ have an intimacy that is seen as and experienced as a close and personal, committed union with him? Or do we see touches of Judas in ourselves: living a dual life, seen publically to be a disciple, yet not living as that as completely as we could in our inner or private lives?

As we step forward with Christ on his final journey into Jerusalem, to the death he dies for us, the invitation is to examine ourselves as disciples, to interrogate how we love and how and what we give to Christ. Are we holding ourselves back, or, like Mary, wastefully extravagant of self and life and gift?

ⁱ *There's another lovely phrase ,too – "hermeneutics of suspicion" – treat every bit of the Bible with suspicion....*

ⁱⁱ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nard_%28plant%29

ⁱⁱⁱ Jirair Tashjian

^{iv} Mary Graves, senior pastor of Trinity Presbyterian Church in San Carlos, CA, found in The Journey with Jesus website.