

Lent 5 Year C 2019

We are now deep into Lent. I can see it on your faces. Five weeks into, as W.H. Auden puts it, the kingdom of anxiety. Next Sunday is Palm Sunday when in the lectionary we commemorate Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem for the last time... Palm Sunday of course begins Holy Week in which we read of Jesus' passion and death. So now all of the lections are focused on Jesus' approaching his so-called fateful hour. All of our readings now point to Jerusalem and the Cross. Today's readings are an interesting choice (at least to me) made by the lectionary gurus. The Old Testament lesson is from Isaiah recounting the liberation of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt, the red letter event in Israel's biblical history. The prophet alludes to the Israelites passing through the Red Sea on their way to freedom.... And then he speaks of the present day which for this portion of Isaiah, is captivity in Babylon. Isaiah is making a typological connection right? He is equating the liberation from the hands of Pharaoh with the repatriation of the people of Israel into their homeland from their fifty year captivity in Babylon. So Isaiah is making a theological point here: That God is all about liberation.... Over the course of history God is seeking freedom for God's people... and yet Isaiah calls God's action a "New" thing. In other words.... God is always about making the old new.... It is a death and resurrection cycle; the way of nature, the way of

all things... that the old passes away, and the new comes inexorably. Nothing stays the same... and yet there is a pattern to this cycle of change and transformation.... It is always liberating. It is always about renewal and rejuvenation.... And.... it is always painful. Like death, like birth. The people of Israel find their freedom from Egypt only after they have experienced the deathly oppression of slavery. They gain reentry into their homeland from Babylon only after experiencing being held prisoners by the warring regime of Persia.

So alongside the reading from Isaiah the lectionary moves us out of Luke's Gospel into the Gospel of John. And here we read the account of Jesus' anointing just before entering Jerusalem where he will be arrested and executed. John gives us some clues as to what he is up to: He mentions the raising of Lazarus from the dead, signaling of course Jesus' resurrection; and he juxtaposes this image with the anointing of Jesus' body for his burial. John is holding up for us the paradox of the faith... Jesus' martyrdom at the hands of the powers that be, and Jesus' resurrection at the hands of God. So the classic interpretation of this passage is the same theology put forth by the prophet Isaiah: that God is doing yet a new thing. God is forever bringing life out of death. Behold the old passes away, and the creation is restored yet again.... God is forever bringing us out of the darkness

into the light... and I believe that classic interpretation... but I want to take a different look at this passage... a different angle that I think gets overlooked.

I want to focus on Mary of Bethany. She's the one who anoints Jesus' feet with the "costly" perfume. The same story occurs in Mark's Gospel, but the woman there is nameless. Mary of Bethany is obviously known as a good friend of Jesus... and you remember that friendship is a predominant theme in John. Much of Jesus' teaching in this Gospel has to do with the art of befriending... making sacred space for the other... laying down one's life for one's friend, as John puts it. It is an image of sacrifice of course... And the image of Sacrifice I think is at the heart of this short passage. Our focus out of habit is always on Jesus in the gospels, but I think the energy of this passage is on Mary... She is the protagonist here. She knows full well what the future holds for Jesus. She's heard the talk in neighboring Jerusalem. She knows he's in deep trouble... and in this intimate moment in the context of a meal (no accident), a gathering of friends, she offers lavish comfort to her friend who is in dire need of it... plain and simple... She is an image of compassion for and solidarity with all the suffering of our world.

It is an image of how we bear each other's burdens in this life. In between our lives and our deaths, in our moments of suffering and need, we are here on

this earth to give comfort and aid, and encouragement. That sounds like so little I suppose... but sacrifice, no matter how mundane, is no small thing... because sacrifice is the means of Love... and Love ramifies, changes things, renews, restores, transforms... What I want to say is... that acts of Love, no matter how seemingly small... acts of Love are the midwives of God's New thing. It is sacrifice, Love in the flesh, that softens the rigors of death; it is sacrifice that soothes the pains of birth, calms our fears, gives us perspective... prepares us for God's proverbial return. Sacrifice is the means of the cycle; the cycle of death and rebirth. Sacrifice, in short, makes history. Despite the violence of so-called civilization throughout seven thousand years of recorded history; it is sacrifice in one way or another that redeems and restores, and saves us from insanity and oblivion.

We, brothers and sisters, are called as the baptized to imitate Jesus... That doesn't mean to be perfect, whatever that is.... Or successful... or right... Paul speaks eloquently of becoming like Jesus in our Christian journey; and I think that means, plain and simple, that we are to live sacrificial lives; that we are to bear each other's burdens; we are to give ourselves over to the truth, God's truth and the truth of who we are meant to be, no matter what it may cost us... We are midwives of God's New thing; the New thing that after all is nothing new.... Only

new circumstances, but the same pattern, Love's pattern. God is forever liberating God's beloved from the things to which we are enslaved.

I don't have to tell you that human life is an ordeal.... At best it is a paradox. There is suffering and there is ecstasy; there is joy and there is pain.... And our life-spans last only for so very short a time... But what makes life beautiful... what makes it true, is that we Love each other; that Love has the power to embrace the whole of life; It can bear the extremes... and it opens us to the possibilities of God's infinite goodness, the new thing that has always been and forever shall be... It is no less than making history..... "See it springs forth....do you not perceive it?"