

Passion Sunday
St Thomas, Salisbury, 2022

Isaiah 43:16-21

Philippians 3:4b-14

John 12:1-8

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Brothers and sisters today we enter into the most holy fortnight of the Christian year. Those of you who use the app, or a paper version of the lectionary for your own private prayers, might have noticed a little cryptic line in italic this morning:

Passiontide begins. Holy Mother Church knows that there is just too much in the story of Holy Week for us to possibly be able to comprehend and digest in the one week, even with the powerful preaching of Kelvin and Ali to help us, and so from ancient times we have been given a whole fortnight to reflect on the extraordinary, wonderful, terrible and awesome story of the hounding, arrest, trial, death and burial of our blessed Lord. And to that account of hounding, arrest, trial, death and burial we give the name Passion. This is the Passion of the Lord which we now enter into, allowing the story to read us as we read the story. Allowing Christ to read us as we read of the extraordinary, overflowing and unbounded love for us which is told forth in the Scriptures which we will read over the coming fortnight. It is a thing most wonderful, for my song, your song, *our* song is love unknown. This is fortnight where we feel the depths of our unworthiness, and the updraught of the Holy Spirit. This is the fortnight where we tell the old, old story of a world made new, of love in the midst of the darkness, and hope in the chill of the tomb.

‘Six days before the Passover’, we hear in today’s gospel reading, the themes are already developing. We are back with Lazarus, who you will remember from a Sunday way back in the summer has been raised from the dead by Jesus. A foreshadowing of what’s to come. And that foreshadowing just develops today. For today we have oil. Mary sinks to her knees in front of Jesus, six days before the Passover, and anoints his body with oil.

Oil is one of those physical, tangible things that the Church inherited from earlier tradition, and that is still used today regularly as a way of symbolising grace. A way of symbolising the fact that God is here. That God operates in the world. We use it very beginning, as a new Christian approaches the font. We use it at the very end, as a Christian departs this life. It isn’t magic: it is a symbol. It points us to the truth that God is there at the beginning, God is there at the end, God is there in all of the glory and the mess in between.

I just want to point out something that might seem flippin’ obvious, but I think is really important. We have oil today, on the first day of Passiontide. Mary fills the room with the fragrance of her offering, her devotion, her act of love for Christ. And that act of devotion is honoured by our Lord. It isn’t dismissed. It is valued.

And early in the morning this time in a fortnight, what do we find again? Oil. Very early in the morning on the first day of the week the women come to the tomb. What are they carrying? Oil, to anoint the body of Jesus. Bookending the profound journey that we make together this Passiontide, is oil. Oil used in an act of devotion and love today. Oil carried, but ultimately unnecessary, as Easter day dawns.

There's something really important here. There is something about the place of our own ministry, our own worship, our own service within God's plan. Mary falls to her knees and anoints Christ in an extravagant and apparently wasteful act of love. Whenever I hear this reading I have Sydney Carter's 'said Judas to Mary' in my head. Do you remember that?

Said Judas to Mary, now what will you do with your ointment so rich and so rare? I'll pour it all over the feet of my Lord, and I'll wipe it away with my hair, she said. I'll wipe it away with my hair.

And the song goes on to narrate the story of Judas challenging Mary. This is so wasteful. Why didn't you sell this and give the money to the poor?

But our service, our Christian calling, is not to one or the other. It is to both. And our care, our charity, stems from our love of Christ. That is what is distinct about the ministry of the Church. There are many excellent charities, and their work is wonderful. And we may well be giving to them. We should be giving to them. And the vicar drew our attention couple of weeks ago to the importance of that in focusing our care and concern for our neighbours in Ukraine at the moment.

We should fall at the feet of the poor, the dispossessed, of the marginalised in service, but the gospel reminds us of this extraordinary truth that when we do that, we find that we have fallen at the feet of our Lord. God is not somewhere else. Our worship is not different to our service. Remember the sheep and the goats: whatever you did the least of these, indeed you did it for me.

Oil at the beginning of the week. Our worship should be lavish. There is a reason we rehearse. There is a reason we use ceremony. Kelvin talks about this in the lilac letter. We take the liturgy seriously because God deserves the very best. Not whatever we think of at the last-minute. We fall on our knees, we empty the entire jug of oil, we try to fill the whole room with the fragrance of the perfume. And that should translate directly into the way in which we live rest of our lives. Lives of graciousness, lives of generosity, lives where we expect to meet Christ and fall on our knees again. If you can, go to the Cathedral on Thursday morning. Listen to the words of the prayers the Bishop will use as she blesses the oil. Oil which points to the service of the church. Oil which symbolises the lives of prayer and service we aspire to, even as we fall heartbreakingly short of that aspiration.

But remember the end. Our worship, our service, is really important. It is an obligation, we need to take it seriously. But it absolutely doesn't buy us anything. It is a response in love to what Christ has already done. Whether Mary knew that when she emptied the bottle of oil, who knows, but in the mist and half-light of Easter morning we discover that the oils that we carry in our hands as an act of love are ultimately unnecessary. They go unused, dropped into the grass as arms are flung wide in wonder, love and praise. Because Christ is risen. And that is what sets the world aright.

If you want to impress your chums over Sunday lunch tell them that at church today we talked about the doctrine of prevenient grace. God meets us in the garden on the first day of the week, risen, not dead, his love extending through and beyond death into new and risen life. We don't raise him from the dead with our oil, but his risen life inspires, strengthens, and redeems us, so we bend down, pick up the oil from the wet grass, and go out

into the world to anoint other people. This is the doctrine of prevenient grace. You find it in Augustine, in the Fathers, and you find it in Wesley. I woke. The dungeon flamed with light. My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

Brothers and sisters, into Passiontide we go. Down into the depths we go, confronting the darkness, knowing that it is in the darkness that the true holy oil, the Holy Spirit, anoints us, freeing our hearts, loosening our chains, and lifting us up to be people who will carry that grace, and lavish the fragrance of that oil, on a world ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven.

Amen