

“Too Much”
Lent 5C
17 March, 2013
Isaiah 43:16-21
Psalm 126
John 12:1-11
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“Mary came in with a jar of very expensive aromatic oils, anointed and massaged Jesus’ feet, and then wiped them with her hair. The fragrance of the oils filled the house. ⁴⁻⁶ Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples, even then getting ready to betray him, said, “Why wasn’t this oil sold and the money given to the poor? It would have easily brought three hundred silver pieces.” (John 12:3-5, The Message)

It was too much. Really. Could *you* stand it? The perfume—so expensive! And so much of it—the fragrance itself was overpowering; didn’t she know it was meant to be used in small doses?

And Mary’s actions—so intimate. Too much public display of affection. So sensual . . . and in front of everybody! John doesn’t say so in his story-telling, but I imagine it must have made *everyone* uncomfortable. It makes *me* uncomfortable just thinking about it, imagining myself there observing the scene.

Who knows exactly what was going through Judas’s mind, but clearly the extravagance and the intimacy of what was transpiring between Mary and Jesus just then scared the hell out of him. Literally—it brought out worst in him. John reports that, despite his protest that the perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor, Judas wasn’t *really* calculating how it would have made a meaningful difference to someone else. In essence, this act of self-abandon on Mary’s part drove Judas to use the plight of the poor as a foil—to justify, or cover for his own selfish ends.

Not that his response is so unusual. Plenty of us find ourselves blurting out or doing things in awkward moments, or when tension has built. Things which serve as diversionary tactics—whether to distract ourselves, or others around us from seeing that our motives or actions haven’t exactly been exemplary. We feel uncomfortable with the thoughts running through our minds, the potentially hurtful desires bubbling up from a darker place within us. Or we want to direct attention away from an activity we’re not entirely proud of. So we call attention to what could be considered a fault or poor choice of someone else’s.

That’s what Judas was doing. John says that when Mary got all demonstrative and extravagant with Jesus, a number of them were gathered in the house of Lazarus and Martha and Mary. They were in Bethany—not far from Jerusalem, where everyone would be heading within the week to celebrate the Jewish Passover, in six days’ time. Already at that point, we’re told, Judas was plotting to betray Jesus—and that had to be stressful. Anyone who’s living a double life has got to be able to live with a good deal of stress, and if their conscience is operating at all, there are surely moments when that tension calls for a little relief. Thank goodness Mary did something dramatic and wasteful, because it provided Judas with an excuse to ease his own conscience—shame on her!

Except Jesus didn't agree. He didn't seem uncomfortable. In fact, he told Judas to leave her alone. We know that Jesus wasn't the self-indulgent type, so it's not like he was just letting Mary go about what she was doing because he liked being pampered in front of everybody. Why *was* Jesus allowing her to engage in this incredibly uncomfortable display?

What's more, he gives her the most extraordinary excuse—an excuse that has been abused in the most appalling ways by Christians since Matthew, Mark, and John recorded the words. “Leave her alone,” Jesus is reported to have said, “She's anticipating and honouring the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you. You don't always have me.” (John 12:7-8, *The Message*)

The famous novelist Kurt Vonnegut wrote in an autobiographical collection of essays and stories that in 1980, he was invited to preach on Palm Sunday—and he chose as his text our Gospel lesson for this morning. That's because, in his words, “*I, as a Christ-worshipping agnostic, have seen so much un-Christian impatience with the poor encouraged by the quotation ‘For the poor always ye have with you.’ ...If Jesus did in fact say that, it is a divine black joke, well suited to the occasion. It says everything about hypocrisy and nothing about the poor. It is a Christian joke, which allows Jesus to remain civil to Judas, but to chide him for his hypocrisy all the same. ‘Judas, don't worry about it. There will still be plenty of poor people left long after I'm gone.’*”¹

Christianity seems to have many eager critics these days. Occasionally, as was the case in this instance, our critics have a valid point to make.

Yesterday, thousands of people gathered in cities across Great Britain to protest the Government's plan to impose a so-called ‘bedroom tax’ (David Cameron calls it a ‘spare room subsidy’), which would effectively cut the social benefits of some of this country's most vulnerable people—or worse yet, evict them from their homes. It's a policy that preys on many poor and disabled in pernicious ways, and one that will wind up costing taxpayers and the socially vulnerable far more (not just financially, but spiritually, culturally, and socially) in the long run than any proponents of the policy are claiming it will.²

Several of us who gathered in Bonn Square wondered why, given the crush and bustle everywhere else in Oxford, there weren't more than the 100-150 people present to actively stand as witnesses against the law that's due to go into effect on April 1st. Is it possible that so many people truly are ignorant—or worse, apathetic—about the real impact that recent and upcoming government changes are having on our society's most vulnerable? Or do people not believe that speaking out can actually make a difference? Or are we just too busy and too preoccupied, maybe too confused to know what to do about it?

Let me dispel any illusions I may be painting about my own record on this score. The truth is, I haven't participated in many public protests or demonstrations yet: I'm sure I can count all I've

¹ [Vonnegut, Kurt](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anointing_of_Jesus) (1981). *Palm Sunday*. Dell. pp. 324–330. ISBN 0-440-57163-4. As quoted on http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anointing_of_Jesus.

² <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/mar/15/bedroom-tax-march-heartless-reform?INTCMP=SRCH>

ever been to on fewer than ten fingers. Thanks to the internet, email, and other social media, I've been able to research and sign a growing number of online petitions addressing various social issues. And I've written a few letters to elected officials, back in the States and here in the U.K.

But I've also felt inhibited from participating in these things in the past: As a church leader (I've rationalized) I represent the Church—and therefore I need to be careful what I say and do in public. I don't want to make my congregation cringe, do I? Not only that, I'm outsider. Sure, I'm employed here and I pay my taxes—I am a member of this society. But I'm here on a temporary visa embossed with the words, “no public funds”; it's made very clear that I am not a full-fledged citizen. Who am I to criticize the British government? These are the kinds of thoughts I've allowed to impede me in the past.

But, without naming names, God has been speaking to me through several of you in the past few weeks. Things you've said, emails you've sent, invitations to consider things differently. One individual in particular sent an impassioned email to many of us that evoked aspects of our scripture readings from the Psalms and from Isaiah this morning: it recounted the past, told our society's story looking both backwards and forwards, and exhorted us to remember who we are and what we have believed and stood up for as a people.

And so, as I explained to our boys when they asked why we had to go and stand with a bunch of people we don't know, when it was raining and cold—especially when we have no idea whether our voices will even be listened to—it's not really a choice for me anymore. I've been experiencing this growing conviction that if I don't start putting my body and energy in places that lend a voice to my beliefs, then I am little more than a silent part of the problem. It's a relatively small sacrifice—hardly extravagant—for me to risk a few raindrops and the possible scorn of those who think it a lost cause. In fact it's more an act of integrity, of uniting my thought with my actions, to join my whole person with those who know there is truly, in the words of the apostle Paul, a “still more excellent way.”³

And besides, who are you or I to think that God isn't capable of doing something new and extraordinary and life-giving—even through small actions like these?

Yes, we hear story after story about how the rich find myriad ways of evading tax, defiantly justifying their ever-increasing stores of wealth while at the same time the world's poorest and most vulnerable are being saddled with blame for being shirkers or scroungers or worse. As the gap between the powerful and powerless widens and deepens beyond human fathoming, it's easy to think the situation is too hopeless even for God to repair.

But friends, the news of today is not a novel story. Both Old Testament and New are full of accounts of the ways in which human beings have always handled the vulnerable with contempt, always greeted the outsider with suspicion, always treated the less-gifted or less-able with disdain. But at least as consistent as humanity's greed and unkindness, is God's extravagant generosity and

3 1 Corinthians 12:31

goodness—and when the people have taken notice of God’s activity, there has been laughter, joy, delight. We recited the words from the Psalmist at the beginning of our service today: “The Lord *has* done great things for us, and we rejoiced!” (Psalm 126:3)

And listen again to the prophet Isaiah, this time from *The Message* translation: “*This is what God says: . . . ‘Be alert, be present. I’m about to do something brand-new. It’s bursting out! Don’t you see it?’*” (Isaiah 43:16, 19)

Where are *you* seeing God’s new things bursting out? Maybe it’s not yet fully formed and blossoming, but you’re getting stirrings of it if you’re alert. Better yet, how are you helping that bursting out—that new birth, to happen?

Remember Mary? She was the sister who paid attention to what Jesus was saying and doing—she sat with Jesus and listened to him, despite the fact that social custom (and her sister Martha) suggested that she should be helping with the cooking and washing up. And Jesus said that she chose rightly.

A week before his death, according to John, Mary demonstrates again that she’s clued into what really matters. And again, she couldn’t care less about what the people around her think. Her lavish act both physically and symbolically foreshadows the even more extravagant act that Jesus is about to perform, and her sacrificial gift of embalming oil and human caresses prefigure the image of Jesus’ ultimate, life-giving sacrifice. The early Jewish-Christian community would still have been familiar with the fragrance of burnt offerings, the purest of them being a faultless lamb.

Mary recognised that Jesus was about to do something new, something extraordinary, something even more courageous than the after-dinner act that made Judas so uncomfortable. And that recognition allowed her to overcome any inhibitions she might have had about looking stupid or wasteful or inappropriate. God was at work in her—she didn’t allow anything to hinder that Spirit’s movement—even as she witnessed God at work in her teacher, friend, and Saviour. She did what she could with the best she had to offer, and Jesus accepted it as the gift and response of solidarity, praise, and preparation that it was.

What about you? Is anyone ever going to shake their head in reaction to your behaviour, your response and gift to Jesus Christ and think, “It’s too much, really”?