**Worshipping God Together : Apart**

**Sunday 3rd April 2022 at 10.30am**

**Church; Physically Distanced but Spiritually United**

Worship Prepared by Rev. Janine Atkinson

**Reflections for the Fourth Sunday in Lent**

**A Call to Worship God**

Lift up your voice and sing boldly

Open your ears and listen carefully

Reach out your hands and give generously

Open your eyes and look wondrously

Take in the beauty of God’s creativity

and give thanks for the variety.

**Hymn – R&S 292: MP 756:**  *Anon. German hymn, early 19th cent. tr. Edward Caswell (1814-78) altd.*

When morning gilds the skies, my heart awaking cries

*May Jesus Christ be praised!*

Alike at work and prayer to him I would repair:

*May Jesus Christ be praised!*

When sleep her balm denies, my silent spirit sighs:

*May Jesus Christ be praised!*

When evil thoughts molest, with this I shield my breast

*May Jesus Christ be praised!*

Does sadness fill my mind? A solace here I find:

*May Jesus Christ be praised!*

Or fades my earthly bliss? My comfort still is this:

*May Jesus Christ be praised!*

Let earth’s wide circle round in joyful notes resound:

*May Jesus Christ be praised!*

Let air and sea and sky from depth to height reply:

*May Jesus Christ be praised!*

Be this, while life is mine, my canticle divine:

*May Jesus Christ be praised!*

Be this the eternal song through all the ages long:

*May Jesus Christ be praised!*

**Approaching God in Prayer**

Listen and be still; Listen for God.

Lord God, I have made time to spend with you;

to worship you Lord Jesus, my saviour and example;

to be filled by you, Holy Spirit my comforter and encourager;

I come now, in this moment just as I am to worship you.

Creator God, you have given me the gift of a new day.

Help me to accept the uniqueness of today

and welcome what it will bring.

Strengthen me as I dare to embrace the future.

Lord, because of what I know about you through your words and promises, I feel confident of some great joy and hope.

So I thank you in a moment of quiet for life itself,

and all that makes life worth living.

***Keep a silence…..***

But most of all I give thanks for your overwhelming gift of love,

shown to us in the life, teaching and example of your Son, Jesus.

In faith I follow his way and know you through all that he has done.

Jesus taught us the best way to live and to pray:-

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our trespasses,

as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

**Gospel Reading – John 12: 1 – 8 (NIVUK)**

**Jesus anointed at Bethany**



**12**Six days before the Passover,

Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. **2**Here a dinner was given in Jesus’ honour. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. **3**Then Mary took about half a litre of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus’ feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

**4**But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, **5**‘Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth three hundred denarii - a year’s wages.’ **6**He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

**7**‘Leave her alone,’ Jesus replied. ‘It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. **8**You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me.’

**Setting the Scene – Sense and Sensibility**

The Bible is a book that invites us to engage with it in many different ways - we read it; hear it; sing it; study it; grapple with it, and so on, but it’s also a book that invites us to use our senses.

**What Bible stories set your senses going?**

**What about taste?** Perhaps the feeding of the 5,000; The last supper.

**Hearing? –** Perhaps the still small voice after the earthquake and the fire; A choir of angels; The stormy sea; The crowds shouting Hosanna!

**Touching?** Maybe you think of the haemorrhaging woman who touched the hem of Jesus’ cloak;Jesus touched Jairus’ daughter; Jesus picked up the bread, blessed it and broke it

**Seeing?** Well, we ‘picture the scene’ many a time; The lilies of the field; Jesus noticing Zacchaeus up a tree; Jesusrestoring sight to the blind.

**Smelling?** Well, the story we’ve just read is one of those that engages our sense of smell. We can imagine the smell of the dinner cooking - Perhaps Martha’s in the kitchen again!

And Mary is at Jesus feet again - not listening to him this time, but pouring valuable and beautifully perfumed ointment on Jesus’ feet.

Just imagine the smell of the perfume quickly filling the room as Mary poured out the ointment onto Jesus’ feet and wiped them with her loosened hair.

Mary wanted to say thank you for all that Jesus had done for her family.

Remember how, in a previous episode, Jesus had praised Mary for listening to him and learning from him whilst her sister, Martha, prepared the meal. He’d also restored their brother, Lazarus, to life. Mary had a lot to be grateful to Jesus for and therefore to worship him for. So she lavished expensive perfume on him in this extravagant gesture of love, affection and worship.

This story gives us a ‘fly on the wall’ glimpse into a really personal, moment.

Nard was an enormously costly perfume derived from an aromatic plant called Spikenard.

For Mary this would have seemed just right because she wanted to show Jesus just how grateful to him she was, how much she valued everything he’d done for her and her family - while she had the chance.

You see, Jesus was taken away from those who loved and followed him just six days later.

This story might help you to think about telling people how you feel about them, while you still have the chance.

We shouldn’t put off doing things to show our love and concern for people, otherwise the moment might be gone and we might not get another chance.

The next hymn takes the form of a conversation between Judas, Mary and Jesus, based on the story you have read

**Hymn – Said Judas to Mary…** *Sydney Carter (Junior Praise no.211)*

Said Judas to Mary, ‘Now what will you do

with your ointment so rich and rare?’

‘I'll pour it all over the feet of the Lord,

and I'll wipe it away with my hair,’ she said,

‘I'll wipe it away with my hair.’

‘Oh Mary, O Mary, O think of the poor,

this ointment, it could have been sold,

and think of the blankets and think of the bread

you could buy with the silver and gold,’ he said,

‘you could buy with silver and gold.’

‘Tomorrow, tomorrow, I'll think of the poor,

tomorrow,’ she said, ‘not today;

for dearer than all of the poor in the world

is my love who is going away,’ she said,

‘is my love who is going away.’

Said Jesus to Mary, ‘Your love is so deep

today, you may do as you will;

tomorrow, you say, I am going away,

but My body I leave with you still,’ He said,

‘My body I leave with you still.’

‘The poor of the world are My body,’ He said,

‘to the end of the world they shall be;

the bread and the blankets you give to the poor

you'll find you have given to Me,’ he said,

‘you'll find you have given to Me.’

‘My body will hang on the cross of the world

Tomorrow,’ He said, ‘and today,

and Martha and Mary will find Me again

and wash all My sorrow away,’ He said,

‘and wash all My sorrow away.’

**Prayers of Adoration and Confession**

Lord Jesus, with Mary we adore you and bring our gifts;

with Mary we worship you and give thanks;

with Mary we sense the urgency of our calling,

and offer our best to you and your world, now and always.

But, mindful of Mary and Judas

and all that took place in Lazarus’ home that night,

we take a moment to think about times we have criticised people who worship in ways that we do not

or when we have condemned the way others spend their time

or their money.

Take a moment to think on these things before God

***Keep a Silence…..***

Gracious God, as Mary anointed your feet with perfume,

as she glimpsed the precious nature of your calling,

so may we, who know that your feet will soon walk the dreadful road to Calvary, anoint them with sadness and penitence

for our part in your suffering and with thankfulness as we glimpse the extravagance of your love –

love that braved the cross of suffering and death for us.

Amen

**Hymn – R&S 371: MP 624:** *Frances Ridley Havergal (1836-79)*

Take my life, and let it be consecrated, Lord, to thee;

take my moments and my days, let them flow in ceaseless praise.

Take my hands, and let them move at the impulse of thy love;

take my feet, and let them be swift and beautiful for thee.

Take my voice, and let me sing always, only, for my King;

take my lips, and let them be filled with messages from thee.

Take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold;

take my intellect, and use every power as thou shalt choose.

Take my will, and make it thine; it shall be no longer mine;

take my heart, it is thine own; it shall be thy royal throne.

Take my love, my Lord, I pour at thy feet its treasure-store;

take myself, and I will be ever, only, all for thee.

**Reflection**

What on earth was she doing? You can imagine the sharp intake of breath! What on earth was she thinking?

Mary’s was a shameless act that could have been interpreted as Mary ‘offering’ herself to Jesus.

Judas, in common with most of the men, thought this was inappropriate - and he said so.

Mary had put herself in a compromising position! This was an intensely personal, intimate, human and moving moment. This act was a celebration of her humanity touching Jesus’ humanity - and a celebration of the divine in both of them.

Mary made a costly and public offering of love to Jesus. Had she even considered the reaction her gesture would get? She didn’t say anything to defend her action to her critics, she just seemed to allow what she did to show the vital difference between cost and value.

Judas, on the other hand knows the cost of everything - a year’s wages (give or take) for a jar of pure nard - but the value of nothing!

Jesus, however, sees the value of her act and invites everyone else in the room to see it as well.

Jesus talks about his burial. Why would he do that? Why would he be talking about his burial - unless he was sure that sooner rather than later, he would be dead.

*Now* Mary’s act looks prophetic, and she emerges from this crucial moment as the only person in the room who has any idea who Jesus really is and how we should all respond to him.

Judas has focused his attention on the excessive cost of the perfume and, not unreasonably, he considers the practical use the money might have been put to by giving it to the poor, whose cause Jesus had, after all, been championing for three years! So, what Judas said, in the light of his understanding of Jesus ministry, made sense. And before we criticise, I wonder, might we have done just the same?

In the embarrassed silence that must surely have followed, with Jesus’ words about burial and always having the poor with us, with the pungent smell of the perfume filling the room and their nostrils, with Judas’ practical sense ringing in their ears and with the sight of Mary’s scandalous wet, loosened hair, Jesus reminds them all to focus on him.

Mary had done just that. She’d put herself in a vulnerable and compromising position. But she thought that was a risk worth taking, compared with her desire to worship, serve and adore her friend and life-giving Lord Jesus.

Jesus seems to have recognised that Mary’s actions were not exhibitionism, they were not designed to be provocative, they were an authentic, wholehearted, profound and uncompromising act of worship. Without words, Mary poured out the longings of her heart with that perfume.

Perhaps there are times when we need to dispense with words and allow ourselves to enter into wholehearted worship with all of our senses. When words run out, perhaps we have to find other ways to appreciate, savour and glimpse God.

Jesus had been doing a new thing - still is in fact - and Mary recognised the value of that. She had been encouraged by Jesus to listen and learn in a society where women did not have that right. Jesus subverted received wisdom of the day in a way that understood, nurtured and valued each and every marginalised human life.

Meanwhile Judas understood nothing, neither the sacramental nature of Mary’s offering, nor the sacrificial nature of Jesus’ offering.

Mary was in tune with the magnitude of the moment and instinctively made the right judgement, to worship Jesus at a precious and crucial moment in time, just six days before his arrest; seven days before his crucifixion. She seemed to predict the imminent ‘out-pouring’ of Jesus’ life.

Perhaps this text invites us to work out for ourselves what Jesus’ life and death means for us, and to consider our own response of praise and gratitude.

Jesus pointed to the value of what Mary did for him, her costly worship was the right thing to do in that moment.

Is our response like Mary’s, to worship God through Jesus with absolutely everything we have?

Now, people often dwell on the last phrase of this passage - Jesus’ enigmatic words about the poor always being with us but not having him. But if we read this to justify thinking that the poor don’t matter, we overlook the rest of Jesus’ teaching and the link between what he says and Deuteronomy 15:11 - *Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you,* *‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land.’*

Any suggestion that Jesus is saying that poor people are inevitable is to miss the point of the nature of Jesus’ ministry (and the Jewish law) we are perpetually to *‘Open our hands in generosity to the poor and needy’.*

When we worship at Jesus’ feet, we must remember the servant Jesus who washed the feet of his disciples and modelled a way of life that puts *us* at the feet of *all* humankind. Jesus said that to feed, clothe and give shelter to the poor - one of the least - we do it for him.

Amen

**Prayer – Passion Prediction** (Prayer Handbook 2016 - p28. Simon Walkling)

Lord God, patient guest and generous host,

thank you for the stories about Jesus.

A thank you dinner:

Lazarus, buried in tears but raised in joy,

Martha, showing her gratitude in service,

Mary, pouring out costly devotion.

Help us to fill our homes with thankfulness for life,

caring service and self-giving love.

A graceless critic:

Judas, selfish behind righteous indignation

Piercing gratitude with feigned generosity.

Forgive us when our mixed motives hurt others

and ourselves.

A friend and saviour:

Jesus, accepting gratitude, challenging self-interest,

turning the dinner, the devotion, the derogatory comment

into a prediction of death and departure.

Open us to receive your love

so that we may show love to those in need.

Lord God, in this story that becomes a passion prediction

may we find love that leads to resurrection.

Amen

**Hymn – R&S 356:** *(verse 1 omitted) Latin, 12th cent. tr. Edward Caswall (1814-78)*

Jesus, the very thought of thee with sweetness fills the breast;

but sweeter far thy face to see, and in thy presence rest.

O hope of every contrite heart, O joy of all the meek,

to those who fall how kind thou art, how good to those who seek!

But what to those who find? Ah, this nor tongue nor pen can show;

the love of Jesus, what it is none but his loved ones know.

When once thou visitest the heart then truth begins to shine,

then earthly vanities depart, then kindles love divine.

Thee may our tongues for ever bless, thee may we love alone,

and ever in our lives express the image of thine own.

Jesus, our only joy be thou, as thou our prize wilt be;

Jesus, be thou our glory now, and through eternity.

**Holding the World in Prayer**

Creator God, you gave us senses through which to experience your world in all its intricate variety and beauty.

You gave us ears to hear the sounds of life - water bubbling in streams;

birds calling to each other in the trees; the sound of laughter!

And we pray for those who hear only the sounds of war;

only words of criticism; only their own voices;

Loving God, speak your words of peace loudly

so that we may hear you well.

Creator God, you gave us eyes to see the splendour of life -

the flash of the turquoise kingfisher; the daisy populated field;

the mountain ridge; the vivid hue of the sunset.

And we pray for those who see only cruelty; only need; only devastation.

Loving God, show them signs of hope.

Creator God, you gave us bodies in which to feel the touch of the world -

the wind on our face; the touch of a hand in our hand

the feel of the sea around our paddling feet;

and the sand between our toes.

And we pray for those who feel only pain;

only the force of an oppressors push;

only the cold of a shop doorway, or a park bench.

Loving God, gently touch and restore them.

Creator God,

you gave us a sense of smell to breathe in the fragrance of the world.

The perfume of a rose; the aromas of food cooking;

the smell of freshly laundered washing.

And we pray for those surrounded by the odours of poverty,

illness and death.

Loving God, bless them with the fragrance of wholeness.

Creator God, you gave us the gift of taste –

the taste of freshly baked bread;

the sensation of rich flavours bursting in our mouth;

the taste of good wine.

And we pray for those who have never tasted good food,

those who are starving

those who have never tasted freedom, those who taste only pollution.

Loving God, give them the gift of yourself in bread and wine.

Creator God,

you gave us intellects to bring to bear on the predicaments of life.

The ability to reason; the ability to invent; the ability to speak.

And we pray for those who struggle to make sense of the world,

those who suffer because our invention has been unwise,

those whose voice is drowned out by pride and prejudice.

Loving God, infuse our minds with your wisdom.

Remembering the people of Ukraine,

I pray now for peace and compassion

for tangible and visible signs that those who have fled

and those who live in fear can be safe.

I pray for a silencing of the guns and bombs

to calm and quieten the screams for help;

that food can be restored to shops and homes in safety again

and that the scents of summer

will be stronger that the smell of charring and burning.

Lord hear my prayer.

Bless us all with the senses we need to nurture and care for those you have given to us for our loving attention and time,

those we remember before you in prayerful quiet now.

***Keep a silence…..***

Lord of all, help me to engage all my senses in following you,

both serving your world and all its people

and when I worship you, Lord God. Amen

**Hymn – R&S 366: MP 33:** *Charles Wesley (1707-88)*

And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Saviour’s blood?

Died he for me, who caused his pain; for me, who him to death pursued?

Amazing love! How can it be that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

‘Tis mystery all: the Immortal dies! Who can explore his strange design?

In vain the first-born seraph tries to sound the depths of love divine.

‘Tis mercy all! Let earth adore, let angel-minds enquire no more.

He left his Father’s throne above — so free, so infinite his grace —

emptied himself of all but love, and bled for Adam’s helpless race.

‘Tis mercy all, immense and free; for, O my God, it found out me!

Long my imprisoned spirit lay fast bound in sin and nature’s night;

thine eye diffused a quickening ray, I woke, the dungeon flamed with light,

my chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

No condemnation now I dread; Jesus, and all in him, is mine!

Alive in him, my living Head, and clothed in righteousness divine,

bold I approach the eternal throne, and claim the crown, through Christ, my own.

**Closing Words and Blessing**

Give time to that which matters most.

Share your gifts with those who need the most.

Show your gratitude to those who have blessed you the most.

Be still with those who love you the most

and live the now of every moment and every day, to the glory of God.

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,

the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit

be with us all, evermore. Amen

***A Personal Prayer***

Lord Jesus,

unlike Mary, I do not have precious ointment to pour over your feet, or vast riches to share with the poor.

The most precious thing I have is now:

this moment, this time.

And that is what I lay at your feet; in love, in joy and in thankfulness.

For you are my Lord, you are my Saviour

and you are the one I love. Amen

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