

Isaiah 43:16-21

Philippians 3:4b-14

John 12:1-8

I am doing a new thing

Today is known as Passion Sunday. As we approach the end of Lent we turn our faces towards Jerusalem; we are aware of the tension mounting; we feel the growing opposition to Jesus; we sense the impending suffering and pain. Dark clouds are most certainly gathering.

We are in John's gospel, with the story of Mary anointing Jesus. It's a story that appears in various forms in all the gospels. In John's gospel the story is set in Bethany. It follows the raising of Lazarus and the revelation that the chief priests were looking to arrest Jesus. Lazarus appears in this story too, along with his sisters Martha and Mary – the one who who anoints Jesus. We are on the outskirts of Jerusalem physically, and on the verge of the momentous events of Holy Week time wise.

So we easily can see why the reading has been chosen for today.

But it's a somewhat strange tale.

Jesus is at the start his final week; and here we can sense both the opposition and tension growing. We would hope to see his followers united to support him but instead the story points to differences. Differences which eat away at unity and begin to bring in division.

We are familiar with this family from both this gospel and Luke's. In Luke we know well the story of Martha in the kitchen and Mary at the feet of Jesus. We also know the family from the wonderful story a few chapters earlier in John's gospel – the raising of Lazarus – where Martha declared her quiet understanding that Jesus would do all he could, and Mary blurted out that if Jesus had been there this would never have happened. Very different characters as we are beginning to see.

In our story Martha is again busying herself in the kitchen, preparing the meal Jesus has come to share. Mary is once again at Jesus feet. But this time not just

listening, but worshipping. Taking some expensive perfume and anointing Jesus. And if that's not bad enough, she lets her hair down and wipes his feet.

This might not seem to us like such an outrageous act, but in that culture it was akin to something like hitching up a long skirt to the top of her thighs. It shocked those present. No doubt people began to mutter.

The story is full of human actions and human words, but really hinges on the words of Jesus which on the surface seem hard to comprehend.

'Leave her alone. She bought (the perfume) so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'

Elsewhere we might think Jesus is always concerned for the poor and outcast; always urging people to look out for those who have not and be generous. Here it seems he is giving a different message. There are some things that are more important. Jesus' impending death would see an end to the old order of things – where inequality and injustice reign – and an ushering in of the new. We might call this The Kingdom of God, not yet fully established of course but which we as Christians can help build. A Kingdom where barriers are broken down and injustice defeated.

It can be seen then as a story that looks to something new happening. God doing a new thing.

Echoes here of the Old Testament reading in Isaiah.

*I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.*

We had an interesting discussion at Lent group the other week about whether God changes. Is the God of the Old Testament different from the God who is revealed in Jesus. That's a hard question to answer – but one thing we can be sure of is that God is in the business of doing new things.

We can see this clearly in the Old Testament in his dealings with Abraham, Moses, David and in the words of the prophets like Isaiah

In the New Testament in the way he revealed himself in Jesus
And in the age to come when the whole creation will be restored to perfection.

And this recognition of God doing new things and our need to respond to those new things is seen also in our reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians.

Paul talks of his heritage. *circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.*

But he counted all of this as rubbish- indeed he uses a much stronger word that conveys thoughts of refuse, muck - even dung. Paul is recognising that God is doing something new in Jesus; that the old no longer applies; that the new has come. What used to be to his credit now has no value. He has taken the plunge and is looking forward to moving forward with the new. *I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.*

So I wonder – where have we seen or experienced God doing new things – and how do we respond to those new things. Do we revel in them, or are we wary of them? DO we join in, or keep our distance?

As we think about that, lets see how the various characters on our gospel story react to the new things God is doing in Jesus.

First Judas. Perhaps we find it hard to think any positive thoughts about Judas. But he was chosen by Jesus to be a follower; he had journeyed with Jesus and had heard what he said and seen what he did. He was there at the last supper; his feet were washed by Jesus. And here, what he says in this situation was probably what almost everyone else in the room was thinking. And its probably the way many of us would have reacted as well. *Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?* His expressed concern was for the poor; for others. He failed to recognise that what Mary was doing was about something new and different. This was about the impending death of Jesus and all the things that his death was going to change. This act of Mary was about the future not the past.

And Mary. She had seen her brother Lazarus being raised to life and now she was herself entering into the new thing God was doing. Whether by conscious act or by some moving of the Spirit within her, Mary poured out all she had in worship of Jesus. Nothing was too precious for him. Nothing was held back. She was driven by her love for him, not by the concerns of what others might think. And in doing so she was able to get a further glimpse of the new; of what God was beginning to do in Jesus, a glimpse of the Kingdom; of the future.

And then there was Martha. Caught somewhere between the two. When Lazarus had been raised from the dead she had declared that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. On one level she knew that God was doing something new. And yet she didn't seem to be able to enter into it in the way Mary did. She continued in her familiar ways of serving God by serving others. Perhaps not brave enough to follow her sisters example.

Here in Shirley I believe that God is beginning to do some new things. We see this in new people coming to join us, we see it in our activities, and in our desire to develop the buildings. We see it in the café, in Messy Church, in Jimmy Tots, in our Sunday worship and many other things. We see it in prayer, in Bible reading and in seeking to know more about our faith.

Its as if God is saying – come and join in with what I am doing here

What is your response to this.

Are you like Judas - Do you remain where you have always been and hardly notice what God is doing, or fail to recognise it for what it is? ; or like Martha - seeing it but finding it hard to step out of the familiar to fully enter into it, or are you like Mary - do you join in with it, take the risk and look to the future.

Recall those words of Isaiah

*I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.*

Are we prepared to follow that way that opens up in the wilderness and drink from the waters. Are we ready to join in with Gods new thing?