

Dear Friends

This homily is based on the Gospel of the day for the Monday of Holy Week, John Chapter 12 verses 1-11, it isn't however restricted to that day. I hope you find it helpful. Unless you have an encyclopedic memory of scripture You'll probably find it helpful to read the text first.

"You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." (John 12:8)

Back in the early 1980's I used to sing in the Rochester Cathedral Auxiliary Choir and was privileged to witness a scene not dissimilar to the one we have just read about in St. John's Gospel.

The event was an evening service during which there was to be a commissioning of diocesan evangelists. Rochester in those days was quite a radical diocese open to all sorts of liturgical innovation. To celebrate the commissioning a group of 'clergy wives' had been gathered together to perform a liturgical dance at the service, (in those days of course there were no clergy husbands, [or at least none that the bishop's wife could invite to join her group]).

In fairness, the gesture was splendid and quite subversive; its artistic merit was not quite of the highest chorographical standards, these were women mostly in middle age who came in very different shapes and sizes who, in all probability, had not danced much since their schooldays. They were wearing leotards with wispy bits of chiffon attached and it was a cold night so they were shivering too. Those dozen or so brave women gathered around the nave altar facing outwards and as the music began moved backwards and forwards a bit and then trailing streamers behind them surged outwards from the middle into the farthest points of the cathedral. The result was electrifying, not least for the dean, not too many years off retirement and gently dozing not expecting to be woken from his reverie by scantily clad women thundering towards him and his brother canons, he all but fainted clean away.

It was a bit of a marmite moment, many of us were very impressed indeed, not so much by the quality of the dance but by the sheer passion with which the dancers executed it. The potential for humiliation was huge, but the dancers wanted to make the point that women had something different, creative and fresh to offer the Church, this was their response, in dance, to the constrictions being placed unfairly on those women in the church whom the Holy Spirit was clearly calling to ordination, a calling which the Church would not recognise.

I referred to it as a Marmite moment because there were also many there who were deeply offended and genuinely shocked. Several people walked out and a couple of people even shouted 'shame-shame.'

For me though it was a glorious and transformative moment, and for me it felt like a milestone had been passed. Clunky and awkward as it was, it had great integrity at a time when for many

integrity within the Church was in short supply.

I am reminded of those brave clergy wives by the gospel reading we have just read! St John admits us to a dinner at the home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus in Bethany and here we witness one of the most subversive and dangerous displays of love and devotion in the whole New Testament.

Nowadays, we live in a multi-cultural society and most of us are used to seeing Muslim women who wear headscarves or veils. Whatever your personal opinion on this, as a society we recognise that for Muslims this is a deeply cultural and theological matter. Many orthodox Muslim women traditionally do not show their hair to men other than their husbands and for many this degree of 'modesty' is very important, Judaism espouses a similar doctrine and practice.

This understanding of modesty is helpful to us in the 21st century west if we are to comprehend just how truly shocking it would have been for an unmarried woman to not only 'let down her hair' at a mixed gathering but then to use it in such a sensuous way, anointing Jesus' feet with costly perfume and then wiping his feet with her hair. If she had done this outside in a public place she would in all probability have been arrested and potentially even have been stoned to death.

Mary was a woman who had listened deeply to Christ, who had recognised the profound value and timing of his presence, and she loved him extravagantly, with passionate service and devotion and this extravagant love found its outworking in her actions that night.

What a contrast to Judas! Here was a man who had spent many hours, days, even years, in the presence of Jesus; he had heard his teaching on the kingdom of God, seen his miracles at first hand, and been part of his chosen team of companions. But Judas had not even begun to see or to understand at least not yet.

He had not begun to recognise presence, power and love in this man Jesus. Judas could only see the conflicts and needs of "now", refusing to see who Jesus was, and who he would become. The vision of God's dream, (the prophecies, Jesus' life and words, the new life of God's kingdom), all of these things it seems had not touched him. In the end, the one who complained at Mary's extravagance chose to gain from the jealousy, hatred and legalism which led to Jesus' death, the death for which Jesus had accepted Mary's loving anointing.

Mary and Judas present us with contrasting responses to Christ. And those responses are not so very different for us today either. There is still God's call to know him, and still so many of us miss the point, and need to be reminded.

Christ's call to live within the kingdom, - to see that which has come and is yet to come, to recognise Christ in our neighbours, in creation and in ourselves, and to live and work for the

growth and glory of that kingdom and its King — all this is a work of God throughout the life of a Christian, and we need always to have open hearts, minds and eyes to do this work.

Mary shows us openness she witnesses to the fact that life in Christ is about letting his love mould us and train us to live with our eyes wide open to the divine activity around us, and to be full of faith in our involvement in that activity.

It is to realise that to walk with the needy, lift up the weak, feed the poor, speak gently, and love fully is God's call on all of our lives. It is to recognise that we need constantly renewed hearts and minds to know the radical vision of Christ and experience the power of the promise of God. Our response to the Coronavirus pandemic urges us to continue doing this and to be so alive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit that we can find those new ways of being Christ in the world. Supporting others and, in so doing find a freshness and new vitality, maybe even a sense of radicalism in our faith.

Judas shows us the truth of what happens if we try living with a divided and loveless heart. It just won't happen; we need first to be transformed ourselves before we can have a part in transforming the world. A vision of the Kingdom of God brings together the call of personal salvation with political and social transformation; recognising the presence of Christ is to see both his lordship and friendship; knowing the promise and glory of God is the Spirit's work in us.

So, as we begin Holy week, and it is going to be significantly different from any that has gone before in our lifetimes. Do we like Judas complain that it should be done differently or that the cost of our time is too great; or do we respond as Mary does with passion and love?

Amen.

With my continued prayers and every blessing

Peter.

