

## LENT 5 Passion Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> April 2019

Susan Peatfield, Reader

Today is Passion Sunday and our eyes turn from the wilderness to the cross. This Lent we have been invited to Encounter Jesus and whether on a Tuesday walking the Way of the Cross, on a Wednesday looking at Gospel passages or on a Thursday in contemplative prayer, there have been many opportunities to make this a special part of our preparation for Easter. And Sunday by Sunday the focus has been on this same invitation to Encounter. Meeting Jesus here in all we do and share together - Sunday by Sunday.

Meeting Jesus. It is not quite as straightforward as answering an invitation. I will meet you at St Peter's on Sunday morning. The Victorian priest and poet Gerard Manley Hopkins spent a life time seeking, finding, losing, finding again the presence of Christ. He sums this experience up in the simple line "For I greet him in the days I meet him, and bless when I understand."

Reading the gospels and their accounts of people who really did meet Jesus – face to face –helps us in our own seeking, greeting and understanding and today's gospel sheds wonderful light on our individual experiences and our shared experiences.

The passage in John is set in the home of Jesus's friends, at a dinner they are holding for him, a week before the last Passover of Jesus's earthly life. The house is in Bethany, where brother and sisters Lazarus, Martha and Mary live. We sense that Jesus feels at home here. He has certainly spent time with them and knows them well. Luke, in his gospel, tells us that Jesus was invited to their home and the sisters welcomed his presence in very different ways. Martha, by cooking up a storm for him and Mary, by sitting at his feet. When Martha complained that Mary wasn't helping her Jesus told her that Mary had chosen the better path – on that occasion at least. What Martha thought about this Luke does not relate. (Luke 10 vv 38-42)

Martha and Mary's brother Lazarus is with them and this is truly a miracle. It is hard to be precise about dates, but probably about a month earlier Lazarus had died and was in the tomb for four days. When Jesus, hearing the news, came to Bethany, Jesus cried for his friend and then raised him from the dead. "Lazarus, come out." (John 11 v 43)

We do not know how many other people are at this dinner in Bethany. Perhaps all twelve disciples or perhaps just the one who is named: Judas Iscariot.

Just think about this dinner party for a moment. In one room we have a man who had been dead, the man who raised him from the dead, the same man who in a week's time will also die betrayed by another man with him at the table. Lazarus. Jesus. Judas. And Martha and Mary. Of all extraordinary encounters this must rate among the most extraordinary.

Each individual is meeting Jesus in their own way. Martha is serving the meal. She is happiest busy – caring for others, keeping the show on the road. But I don't think it's fanciful that when she pauses, catches her breath, looks at Jesus and catches his eye that he sees her service as a beautiful gift to himself and to all of us lucky enough to have a Martha in our lives.

Lazarus is described as being at the table with Jesus (in one translation as "reclining" – leaning in towards Jesus). What must he be feeling, overwhelming gratitude, perhaps a certain confusion that is an oddity of the human condition that we can be shy around those who have saved our lives? I think we can see Lazarus wanting to be as close to Jesus as possible, to be hanging upon his every word. Eager to know, to understand, to follow Jesus more closely.

Mary. Mary, has form we might say now, once before she has sat at Jesus's feet and now she not only kneels before him but anoints him with perfume and dries his feet with her hair. She pours her costliest gift upon him. The gift not of the perfume but of herself. The cultural taboo of letting down her hair to wipe his feet is not shameful abasement but true worship. And as before Jesus recognises the gift and protects the giver from criticism and reproach.

Criticism, reproach, resentment, rejection, betrayal. This is the encounter of Judas. John tells us Judas is a thief and that is why he resents the costly perfume being used – he wanted to sell it and keep the money. Hence Jesus's words about the "poor being always with us". This is not Jesus lack of care for the poor, but his reading of Judas's motivation. But there is so much more going on in Judas' heart here. Something he sees at Bethany makes him feel hurt and shut out. And the desire to hurt back becomes stronger in him than the humility to serve, to listen, to worship or to love.

So what is it about Bethany that helps us here today in our shared encounter this morning?

Simple point is that we all engage in the service bringing our own stories of meeting with Jesus. Depending on our personalities, our stages of life - both physical and spiritual -we will find different points of connection in what we do here.

Some like Martha will be fed by the active participation in making things happen. Will catch Jesus's eye while making the coffee, collecting the hymn books, talking to a troubled friend.

Some like Lazarus want to say thank you, to know more about Jesus, to learn. To drink deep of the prayers, reading, teaching offered each week and to feel closer to Jesus with each new moment of understanding.

For some like Mary, the "beauty of holiness" is what is found here and the opportunity in words and music, ritual and in kneeling at the altar to give all that we have and to receive all that we are.

None of us are Judas, but all of us can feel hurt, shut out and critical. Sunday instead of being a day of sharing, gathering and meeting with Jesus in each other can be a time of frustration and dissatisfaction – with ourselves and others.

Martha, Lazarus, Mary and Judas. What they held in common –yes, even Judas, is what we hold in common the great and overwhelming love that the one we come to meet has for us. Jesus. As St Augustine understood: He loves all of us as if there was only one of us.

When we meet Jesus we meet his love. And we meet it in our activities, in our prayers and in our worship, and in each other. This love does not change from day to day, we do. The word encounter has been a good one for us this Lent but it is a word that describes only the beginning of what his love offers us. Like those at Bethany Jesus calls us not "people he has met" but friends, brothers, sisters, children of the same heavenly Father.

This week we move as we move through Passiontide and toward the showing of Jesus's love for us on the cross, let us rest with him at Bethany and let us move from meeting to friendship and from friendship to love, as he loves us. Amen