

Readings for the Fifth Sunday in Lent – Passion Sunday

6th April 2025

First Reading: Isaiah 43:16-21

Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. 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. The wild animals will honour me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

Second Reading: Philippians 3:4b-14

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: 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.

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Gospel: St John 12:1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it 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."

A Reflection for the Fifth Sunday in Lent

In the words of Isaiah, God says: 'I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?' The prophet probably had more immediate things in mind as the exiles returned to Judah from Babylon, but, for us, especially at this time of year, it seems obvious; Isaiah is referring to the coming of Christ; his life, death and resurrection and his promise of new life in him. As with much of Scripture, there is room for both understandings. However, because we know the whole story of Jesus, and look back on those events after many years, and with an inheritance of centuries of scholarly theological reflection, I think it can be hard for us to recognise their full significance, and especially just how difficult it was, as Jesus' earthly life drew to a close, to perceive the new thing that was happening.

One of the things I particularly like about this prophecy of Isaiah is that it is creation that first recognises this 'new thing' that God is doing. 'I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild animals will honour me, the jackals and the ostriches...' That reference to the 'way in the wilderness' takes me straight to Isaiah's prophecies concerning John the Baptist, who will be 'the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "make straight the way of the Lord"', who will proclaim the coming of Christ. And then we have the wild animals. So often, it is still creation that draws us back to God. In places like this, where we are so fortunate to live, in weather like we've enjoyed this week, creation is shouting God's glory at us. But even when it is not like this, in the depths of winter when the first snowdrop appears, in concrete jungles where a small flowers flights to bloom in a crack in the masonry, or where a bird sings in the silent aftermath of an artillery attack, creation still proclaims God's glory to us, despite the odds. Creation points out to us that God is doing a new thing and pleads with us to turn back to God and God's ways.

I've spoken quite a lot this Lent about it being a season of returning to God. In 'old money', today was kept as Passion Sunday, the beginning of Passiontide, a day to begin the deepening of our Lenten observance as we approach Holy Week. For the last 50 years or more, this has no longer been the position of the church; this is the fifth Sunday in Lent rather than Passion Sunday, and Palm Sunday is sometimes referred to as Passion Sunday, the day when we read the full account of Jesus' passion and death. Nevertheless, as we approach Holy Week, it is appropriate to keep to that old theme of Lenten observance, reflecting on our need for penitence and forgiveness, and on our dependence on God.

We all need to do that. We only have to look around us at the world – there are so many places where repentance is needed: damaged environments, the inequalities of extreme wealth and poverty, the conflict, the suffering. They are a stain on all of us. And tragedies such as that which has been unfolding in Myanmar this week show the fragility of our trust in ourselves and in material wealth. Tragedy doesn't discriminate between rich and poor, powerful and lowly.

Paul knew that. It doesn't matter who we think we are, and, as he states in today's passage from the letter to Philippians, he had all the right credentials, the best CV. Yet all of that is as nothing, he regards it as rubbish. Nothing, he says, is important apart from 'the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord'. Despite the awful things happening in the world, and Paul himself was writing from prison under threat of execution, there is hope in Christ and that is the most important thing. Paul recognised that God was indeed doing a new thing in his own time and just as we are called to do, he put his trust in God and made God the priority in his life.

Paul, of course, like us, knew that the story of Jesus didn't end with his death, but continued on through resurrection and his promise to be with his followers. Mary of Bethany, in today's Gospel, didn't know that outcome, yet she too recognised that 'surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord' that Paul referred to. She humbled herself before Jesus, anointing his feet with pure nard and wiping them with her hair. The pound of pure nard was excessively expensive, as Judas pointed out. In all probability she gave all she had, the only precious thing. It was intentional extravagance, an act of love and commitment. Jesus tells us Mary did this in anticipation of his death. Did she realise this, I wonder?

This incident took place at a dinner hosted by Mary's brother Lazarus who had been raised from the dead by Jesus not long before. The reaction of the authorities to the raising of Lazarus was to plot to kill Jesus, so perhaps Mary did know, or otherwise had some premonition that all was not well. Despite not knowing how the story will work out, Mary recognised the exceptional nature of Jesus and of the moment.

This Gospel passage is also that set for the Monday in Holy Week. The evangelist places this event just a few days before Jesus' death, and Mary's act proclaims that coming death. It is what theologians call a *kairos* moment. *Kairos* is a Greek word meaning time, but not time as marked by a clock, rather as a moment of significance. It is a moment that merges past, present and future – in this case the raising of Lazarus from the dead (past), the anointing of Jesus feet (present) and Jesus' coming death (future). *Kairos* time is God's time, and we are invited to live in God's time.

In Isaiah, God said 'I am doing a new thing'. It is in the present tense, it is continuous. It's not 'I did a new thing', or 'I will do a new thing'; it is 'I am doing a new thing'. It is in *kairos* time, God's time. For those present with Jesus in the last days of his life on earth, it probably didn't feel like God was doing a new thing, or at least not in any beneficial way. As those on the road to Emmaus later said 'We had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel', yet it seemed that all their hopes were being dashed. But as we now know, that wasn't the end. It wasn't as it appeared to them, as they soon discovered.

As we come to Holy Week and Easter, I like to think of it as *kairos* time. God is continuing to do a new thing that is bound up in past, present and future. So Holy Week is a particular opportunity to reflect on what God has done, and what God is doing now and what God is going to do, all bound into one great action of God. And, importantly, it is an opportunity to reflect on what our part in that work of God is.

But during Holy Week, it is also good to walk each step of the way with Jesus in real time, day by day, not leaping straight from Palm Sunday to Easter. Instead, forget that we know how this ends and re-live, as far as it is possible, the full impact of the last week of Jesus' life on him and those close to him. Then, when we reach Easter, we can feel anew the astonishing miracle of resurrection in all its glory. We can recognise that God is indeed doing a new thing. We can assert with Paul that nothing matters apart from 'the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord'.