6 April 2020: Holy Week Reflections

Holy Monday

John 12: 1-11

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‘There were also women …’

One of my favourite verses in the gospels, in fact it is only half a verse and it comes at different
points in all of the synoptic Gospels, is There were also women …(Luke 8:3, Mark 15:40)

This reminds us that the community around Jesus, those he shared his ministry with, was a
mixed community of men and women. This often seems to be forgotten. Jesus is usually imaged
with his male disciples with occasional walk-on parts for women. Yet, the gospels tell us that
the women disciples who came down from Galilee with Jesus were integral to the group,
providing for Jesus out of their own resources.

We even know some of their names: Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of James, Joanna, Salome,
Susanna. As well as these Galilean women we know the names of the sisters whose home at
Bethany appears to have been a refuge for Jesus and his friends - Mary and Martha, the sisters
of Lazarus.

Jesus appears to have taken women seriously.

We read about Martha and Mary a number of times, first in Luke’s gospel, where we find Mary
defying the conventions of her day and joining the men sitting at the feet of Jesus learning from
him. Martha is put out and wants Mary to be corrected and sent back to help her, but Jesus
affirms Mary’s choice.

We meet them again earlier in John’s gospel mourning the death of their brother. On this
occasion, it is Martha who finds the courage. She comes out to meet Jesus and as they
converse, she proclaims him as the Messiah, the one in whom the hope of the resurrection
rests. A great statement of faith paralleling that of Peter. Both sisters witness the restoration of
their brother to life.

In today’s reading we find a picture of intimacy in which it is Mary of Bethany who performs a
seemingly pointless extravagant gesture. She takes the pot of expensive oil and pours it over
Jesus’ feet wiping it with her hair. Judas is there to point out the sensible action she should
have taken. With a level of piety he suggests that she should have sold it and given the money
to the poor. Yet, Jesus affirms Mary’s foolish and wasteful act, recognising the depth of meaning in what she is doing.

The gospels give us three different stories of Jesus being anointed with precious oil. What they all have in common is that it is a woman who does the anointing. What they also all have in common is that, contrary to popular thinking and many art and film depictions, none of these women are Mary Magdalene.

Are they simply different versions of the same event? Or did it happen more than once? Opinion is divided. I increasingly think that these were different but similar events maybe even deliberately echoing each other.

Matthew and Mark tell of an unnamed woman who simply appears and pours perfumed oil over Jesus’ head.

This act echoes the role of the prophet in anointing the next king. Think about Samuel going out to look at the sons of Jesse and, on seeing David, pouring the oil on as a mark of his prospective Kingship. It also echoes the anointing of the Old Testament priests, the oil poured onto the head of Aaron and his sons consecrating them.

In this encounter, it is a woman who is the prophet, publicly proclaiming the truth of Jesus as the anointed, the king of God’s kingdom, consecrating him as a priest and marking him as the Anointed one, the Messiah, the Christ.

Luke’s story is more complex and is the one best known (perhaps because the unnamed woman in this account is a woman of ill repute – she is a sinner). In fact, the story is about hospitality and welcome. Simon the Pharisee has invited Jesus in to a meal but he has stinted on that welcome. He is the religiously upright man and is contrasted with the religiously unclean woman. This is about worldly values; who is the one who is respectable and religiously righteous?

The woman pours perfumed oil on Jesus’ feet alongside her tears and wipes them clean with her hair. It is a disturbingly erotic image but, Jesus instead of being embarrassed, honours her generosity contrasting it with the meanness of the welcome he has received from the religiously righteous man.

John’s account which we have just heard shows Mary of Bethany enacting a similar gesture. There is no contrast here between the righteous and the sinner. This is not a public act but an act between friends and again a prophetic act. Mary recognises at some level the likelihood of Jesus’ death, anointing his body for the tomb. She is unmoved by Judas’ taunts of extravagant foolishness.

Somehow, she has recognised something of who Jesus is and what might be about to happen. The atmosphere is tense in the world outside their home, but here she offers a faithful gesture of commitment and a prophetic gesture of what is to come.

Later in the week, Jesus will, like the sinful woman in Simon’s house and Mary of Bethany in her
own home, kneel down and handle the feet of others, washing them with water and drying them with a towel, no doubt remembering the feel of the rich oil, soft hair and hands of the women on his own feet.

So, on this Monday we remember the women who Jesus took seriously, the women who God inspired to act prophetically, the women who understood something of the truths about Jesus and found ways of bearing witness to that.

Dorothy L Sayers, at a talk on Women’s equality in the 1930’s wrote this;

Perhaps it is no wonder that the women were first at the Cradle and last at the Cross. They had never known a man like this Man - there never has been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, never flattered or coaxed or patronised; who never made arch jokes about them, never treated them either as "The women, God help us!" or "The ladies, God bless them!"; who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously; who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unself-conscious. There is no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole Gospel that borrows its pungency from female perversity; nobody could possibly guess from the words and deeds of Jesus that there was anything "funny" about woman’s nature.

Jesus recognised that women could be revelations of God, they could listen and learn, they could be prophetic, they could teach a lesson to the righteous if only the righteous would learn to listen.

Yet – though Matthew and Mark say that the anointing woman will be remembered, her name is not recorded. And down the ages the sinfulness of the Lukan woman has been stressed over her prophetic witness.

So, we ask today - Where do our prejudices stop us from seeing and hearing the truths of God in those we overlook or marginalise? Does our sense of righteousness limit our capacity to act generously to God and to others? Are we more like Simon the Pharisee than any of these women?

The wisdom of the world is clear about status; those who are considered wise and respectable. The foolishness of God speaks through the lives, and actions of many who the world considers insignificant, especially through those who have the capacity to show love and compassion to others. We are seeing this very powerfully in our current crisis where so many of the low-paid carers looking after the ill and vulnerable are women, as are the supermarket shelf stackers and checkout workers.
The Anointing woman
The woman sees Jesus and she takes
the jar of perfume oil, which she breaks
over his head or perhaps his feet,
while, embarrassed, others sit and eat.

An anointing, an ordination,
a consecration and preparation.
She is a prophet and penitent
proclaiming Jesus as heaven sent.

Her one holy act of foolish love
in which she mirrors her God above.
Whose generous love will be outpoured
in the sacrifice of Christ our Lord.

- Emma Percy

^Dorothy L. Sayers, Are Women Human? Astute and Witty Essays on the Role of Women in Society