

Sermon on Passion Sunday, 6 April 2025

by Rev. Alan Stewart



'Anointing - A communion of destinies'

When was the last time you felt embarrassed? One of the greatest joys of parenthood, of course, is to thoroughly embarrass your kids at every given opportunity. It's part of the job description, and in my case usually it involves some dad-dancing. As I grow older, I actually find I'm less prone to embarrassment and I'm looking forward to the day when I fully embrace what that wonderful poem celebrates:

*'I shall sit down on the pavement when I'm tired
And gobble up samples in shops and press alarm bells
And run my stick along the public railings.'*

There's something liberating and healthy about not taking ourselves too seriously.

This episode we read about today went much further than embarrassment. For most of those present, it was both culturally shocking and shameful. An intimate and wasteful act, bordering on erotic, is played out in public, in the home of respectable people, between an unmarried male and female.

All four of the Gospel writers include similar stories but they can't quite agree on the where, the when or, indeed, the who.

All agree it took place in the town of Bethany, but was it the home of Lazarus or the home of Simon the Pharisee? Was it two or six days before Passover, or much earlier in Jesus' ministry? Was it, as this version suggests, Mary, sister of Lazarus, or elsewhere another unnamed woman of more dubious reputation? And then there's the question of where on Jesus' body the oil was poured; was it on the head, on the feet, or both?

What they all agree on is that this was an extremely uncomfortable, misunderstood and, frankly, scandalous thing to do. Mary, we're told, lets down her hair in public; unacceptable. She then pours an annual salary's worth of perfume on Jesus, and then dries it with her hair.

What was her motive, I wonder?

Was she somehow trying to say thank you to Jesus for 'seeing' her in a culture where most women felt invisible? Did she somehow sense that Jesus' life was drawing to a premature end? Or was she, in fact, in love with him? We don't know.

What we do know is that it's an act of sacrificial love which Jesus accepts and defends and interprets in his own way; 'She is anointing me for burial', he says.

Jesus knew this was a holy moment; a moment filled with the fragrance of tenderness and care, vulnerability and human connection.

It's one of the great privileges of my job to be invited into some of the holy 'moments' within other people's lives; moments of grief and celebration, of faith and doubt, moments of trauma and repair. Extraordinary moments in the ordinary; around kitchen tables and in cafes, on pews or park benches; anywhere and everywhere becomes holy ground.

I wonder, when was the last time you experienced such holy ground?

There are few places, I think, more holy than hospitals.

I imagine most of us have spent time in hospital and experienced something of the spectrum of the human story and the kaleidoscope of emotions played out within those walls and wards and waiting rooms.

Here, people take their first breath and their last. Here, tears are shed, of pain or relief, of joy and of sorrow. Here bodies and minds heal, or don't. Here, families wait and watch and often worry. Here, like nowhere else, we experience the holy ground of our own frailty, mortality and vulnerability.

Following his recent stay in hospital, Pope Francis wrote:

"The walls of hospitals have heard more honest prayers than churches. They have witnessed far more sincere kisses than those in airports. It is in hospitals that you see a homophobe being saved by a gay doctor. A privileged doctor saving the life of a beggar. In intensive care, you see a Jew taking care of a racist. A police officer and a prisoner in the same room receiving the same care. A wealthy patient waiting for a liver transplant, ready to receive the organ from a poor donor.

'It is in these moments, when the hospital touches the wounds of people, that different worlds intersect according to a divine design. And in this communion of destinies, we realise that alone, we are nothing.

'The absolute truth of people, most of the time, only reveals itself in moments of pain or in the real threat of an irreversible loss.

'A hospital is a place where human beings remove their masks and show themselves as they truly are, in their purest essence'.

A communion of destinies.

Hospitals remind us that we are all the same; that life is fragile and holy. It reminds us of what is essential, and real and of true value.

Today is Passion Sunday, that moment when Jesus turns his face towards his own destiny. Ahead of him lies betrayal, desertion, humiliation and death. And in the face of this, everything takes on a new perspective. It's little wonder, then, that Jesus was so moved by this awkward, 'inappropriate', and tender act of love.

This anointing asks us to set aside our ideas of respectability and what's 'right', and to approach life with that same perspective of what's really important; being real with one another; creating that holy hospitable (there's that word again) ground where we can all authentically and unapologetically be ourselves. This is the place of our mending and the mending of the world.

I'll leave the last word to the Holy Father:

'This life will pass quickly, so do not waste it... Love more, forgive more, embrace more, live more intensely! And leave the rest in the hands of the Creator.'