

## Great St Mary's Cambridge: Sermon: 6 April 2025 (Lent 5)

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### Isaiah 43. 16-21

<sup>16</sup> Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters,

<sup>17</sup> who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior;

they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:

<sup>18</sup> Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.

<sup>19</sup> 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.

<sup>20</sup> 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,

<sup>21</sup> the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

### Philippians 3.4b-14

<sup>4</sup> Even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh.

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup>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; <sup>6</sup>as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

<sup>7</sup> Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. <sup>8</sup>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 <sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, <sup>11</sup>if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

<sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup>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, <sup>14</sup>I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

### John 12.1-8

<sup>12</sup> Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup> There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, <sup>5</sup> 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' <sup>6</sup> (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.) <sup>7</sup> Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. <sup>8</sup> You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'

During this last week the question ‘what gives you hope in this season of Lent’ came up on a number of occasions. We reflected on the question at the start of the PCC meeting. It has been present at our Wednesday Lent talks, with the theme ‘Living faithfully in a complex world’. This week, our speaker was Ruby Quantson Davis, who works for ‘Peace Direct’, an international organisation that supports local peace-makers in 15 countries across the world, many of them places that don’t get a mention in the main stream news. As overseas aid has recently been dramatically cut by the USA and our own government, this impacts the poorest and most vulnerable in the world, and many of Ruby’s international colleagues are affected. A tough environment for all who are working for justice, peace and poverty relief.

For me, and I think for many of us, the question of ‘how do we hold onto hope’ is very live question at this time.

Today is the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent – also called Passion Sunday. As we journey with Jesus to the cross, we see that the enmity towards him is growing. You will notice the covered crosses and ‘Majestas’ this morning, symbolising that we are beginning the process of reenactment of Jesus’ journey to the cross. Next Sunday, Palm Sunday, our church service will begin with the procession of palms as we remember Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem.

The enmity towards Jesus and his death are getting closer, and yet, our readings this morning are offering a great deal of hope.

The first reading from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 43, announces <sup>48-49</sup> ‘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.’

One commentator( American) writes ‘ This is a text to read when it feels the world is crashing down around us, when our minds are too jaded, and our spirits too discouraged to see how God may be present in our current darkness’.

These words from the later part of the book of the prophet Isaiah were originally addressed as the Israelites in exile in Babylon in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, they had been captured, their cities devastated; people who have lived with years of disappointment, horror and shame. For them to hear these words must have caused disbelief as well as offering encouragement and a rekindling of hope. It is this same chapter, Isaiah 43, which opens with the well-known words: ‘do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name’, when you walk through the water I will be with you.’

Isaiah’s words to the down beaten Israelites in exile does not come out of nowhere: his words are rooted in their memory of what God has done in the past, especially in the exodus out of Egypt. God has not forgotten them; God continues to be with them and God will again lead them out of slavery into freedom.

This is a pivotal text for the book of Isaiah and for the whole Old testament: It is about God’s purpose for a world in which all are set free and flourish: God will liberate his people from slavery in Babylon, and ultimately, God will set all people free from that which most deeply enslaves us: our fear of death and separation from God.

For us Christians the 'new thing' that God is preparing comes to fulness in Jesus Christ, in the revelation of a love beyond our comprehension, at the centre of all things, a love that is self-giving, that is freely given to all; a love that affirms all existence and transforms it. In Jesus Christ, God liberates us from death; the historical and personal become intertwined.

In our new testament readings this morning we encounter Paul, writing to the Philippians, and Mary of Bethany, in the gospel reading from John, who both, in their different ways experience the reality of this new thing, that God is doing in Jesus.

Paul knew Jesus' liberating power and presence in the most astonishing way, in the depth of his bones. His encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus was so profound that from that point onwards he knew he could only live relying on the power of God. <sup>18</sup>... *I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.*'

It is as if Paul, through his encounter with Christ had been given a new 'operating system' that enabled him to live from this deep place of calling, faith and trust, which we see in other saints across the centuries; which we all struggle to live by, too. It does not make for an easy or pain-free life. But it makes for a fruitful life, trusting that our daily faithful loving and living will be used by God for God's loving purposes. We know from Paul's letters that he often struggled and was a bit of a mess, just like we are. Yet he lived from a deep place of hope and faith in Jesus Christ in a world that was as complex and disturbing as ours.

Mary's experience and faith is quite different; for many of us perhaps easier to relate to.

Mary had the privilege of knowing Jesus in person, and we have a sense they had become friends. She intuitively knew who Jesus is and what he is about. In the setting described in our gospel reading this morning, Mary knew deep down that Jesus would be walking to his death as he was on his way to Jerusalem. However, rather than sitting in a corner crying or pleading with him not to go to Jerusalem, she decides to perform this act of great love and generosity, affirming Jesus as Messiah (anointed one) and Lord.

Everyone gathered at the house in Bethany that evening will have known that great danger was lying ahead. They knew the enmity and plotting against Jesus had been growing since Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, but I wonder how many of them were in denial of the fact that Jesus might be killed.

Mary gives her all: the household's supply of precious, costly, fragrant perfume; her hair to wipe his feet; her love to affirm Jesus, perhaps to encourage, to perfume what lies ahead with the fragrance of love and hope stronger than the stench of death.

This gospel is a story that prepares us for the great tragedy and suffering that lies ahead for Jesus, but for me, it is also a story of deep hope. In a situation, that looks as if all is about to be lost; that is filled with sorrow and pain, Mary chooses to do an act of great love. As do people across the world each day: men, women, children. God uses every loving act, however big or small to create new life, new hope out of it.

When we think about our own fears at this time and all that makes us anxious: living in a world where injustice, violence and suffering are on the increase, with a heightened sense of uncertainty and danger, for ourselves and others- where do we find hope?

As people of faith, this is a time where our scriptures and our faith must become our grounding again; the rock on which we stand, and where we find the hope grounded in God's faithfulness.

God's spirit is with us, calls us to follow Jesus, to love and be light in the world. God uses every loving act, however small, to make new life out of it. Our faithful loving action will make a much bigger difference than we can imagine. The scriptures offer hope for all of us, to persevere when there seems so much enmity all around.

That is why we are again and again invited to turn to God, to let go of our anxieties and fears, to let God and to allow the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection to re-create us that like Isaiah, Paul and Mary, we know the power of God at work in the world; that love is ultimately stronger than evil. Amen.