

**Year C**  
**Fifth Sunday of Lent / Passiontide begins**  
**Is.43:16-21**  
**Psalm 126**  
**Phil.3:4b-14**  
**John 12:1-8**

### **This new thing**

“Well, he’s shorter than I thought.”

“He seems ok, but I’ve only seen from a distance so far so the jury’s still out.”

“He hangs around with some strange people I think.”

“And what’s with that funny accent?”

All things that you might have heard being muttered around Jesus as he went from place to place, and I’m sure not things that are in people’s minds here this morning! In our Gospel reading Jesus retreats to the home of his friends, perhaps to escape the scrutiny and comment of the crowds, only to find it amongst his own disciples. As our Lenten journey intensifies as we begin Passiontide, I can’t help but feel again that the Holy Spirit is having a bit of a game with the lectionary readings. On my final Sunday in my previous parish, the Gospel reading had Jesus say, “I must be on my way.” Here, for my first sermon as Vicar of Berwick the prophet and the apostle tell us to forget the former things and to press on to the future. Yes, there is a chuckle in heaven.

What are we to do with these readings this morning? As we approach the last weeks of Lent maybe God is inviting all of us to consider what this new thing is, and what it means to us.

Isaiah's message comes to a people long in exile. Some have given up hope and despair of ever seeing Jerusalem again; some have actually got quite comfortable in Babylon and don't want to go back thank you very much. This part of Isaiah, often called Second-Isaiah because many scholars believe it's another prophet, is really all about hope and comfort. And so, to these people Isaiah says, "forget what came before, see what is coming." But we have a problem here, can the prophet actually want the people to forget all that God has done before? Because if so we're going to have a very short APCM! Hasn't God commanded a perpetual remembrance of the Passover, doesn't God remind the people constantly of the works done on their behalf? The prophet himself reminds the people of what God has done, he uses the past to bring hope to the present and the future. The God who made the Red Sea dry ground can make the desert a river. What Isaiah is saying, is don't relegate God and God's works to old news, to history books or nostalgia. God can do that all again, and more, and God can do it today.

And the truth is we often don't want to forget. I don't want to forget the good people of Little Ilford, the journeys we accompanied each other through, or the other churches and people who have blessed me. You don't want to forget Dennis and Catherine, Alan and Susan, and all the talented, faithful curates you have trained here. And we don't have to.

But we do have to forget all the things that make us think God's actions are only in the past. We do have to forget all the things that make us think that our best days are behind us. We do have to forget all the things that stop you and me becoming the people God has called us to be. We do have to forget the broken promises, the hurts, the betrayals, the failures; our own and others. That is what Lent calls us to do. Forget them, says God, because see I am about to do something new, I am doing a new thing.

Which of course, is where St Paul is going as well. Paul isn't saying that his inheritance is worth nothing, all of it is important, what he is saying is that none of it achieves what Christ has done, none of it gives us access to God's grace, because that is freely available. So, for Paul, we press on to take hold of what is already there for us, we don't strive to achieve it, or work hard for it, we take what God already freely offers.

And that might be some comforting words for us this morning, they are for me! I'm aware that I'm stepping into some expectations here, there is a hope for a different future, a recognition that there is work to do. And there always is, and it can seem daunting. We live in anxious times, we belong to an anxious church, worried and fixated on numbers, age, finance. But in a sense, Paul is encouraging us to forget those things and press on to take hold of what God is doing. Don't get me wrong, those things figure, but they are not the be all and end all. If we change who we are to attract people, if we become something we are not to get more income, we are taking hold of the former things. But if we trust that God is calling us to the mission that God has already begun, we take hold of what is ahead of us, the gift that God has for us in God's grace.

Which brings us to the home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus. John places this emphatically and deliberately at this point in his gospel, this begins Christ's passion, not the Triumphal Entry. Because Mary and Judas show us the difference between holding on to the old and taking hold of the new.

In anointing Jesus' feet Mary shows that she understands something about this new thing. In one sense Mary's action is backward looking, she anoints Jesus in the same way that John the Baptist anoints Jesus at his baptism. Both by their

actions demonstrate that they understand something about who Jesus is. Jesus takes Mary's action and translates it into the future, to his death, to the new work that God is going to do through the cross. Judas shows that he cannot comprehend this new thing. His is the only speaking part here, Mary, Martha and Lazarus say nothing (in fact Lazarus never speaks in John's Gospel), by their actions they show they are prepared for this new thing by serving, feasting and anointing. Judas shows with his words, he is stuck in the past, stuck in the old ways, not comprehending who Jesus is.

And so here we are, beginning Passiontide and beginning a new season in our life as a parish. This new thing. And it would be very tempting to preach on forgetting all that has gone before, but we're not called to do that, neither are we called to hold on to what has gone before. I'm sure I will hear the words, "we've tried that before," a few times but that doesn't mean we can't try again, in this new thing. What lies ahead of us is built on what has gone before, but it is not the same and so we are called to strain forward, to press on, to take hold of what God has prepared for us, now.

As Lent moves to Holy Week and Easter, as we move from the interregnum to a new season, so we are reminded that the God who turned the sea into dry land, who promised to turn the desert into rivers, is the same God who

holds before us our future. The same God who lived as one of us, who sat at the table with Lazarus, who was served by Martha and the same God whose feet Mary anointed and dried. It is the same God who invites us to feast together at this Eucharist, the same God who invites us to serve, the same God who invites us in these final days of our Lenten journey to offer our costliest gift, our lives. Always the same God, but not always in the same way. Come, see what this new thing means for you, for us, and let us press on to take hold of it together in Christ.

Amen.