

Monday of Holy Week
Isaiah 42:1-9
John 12:1-11

Intimacy.

Holy Week is a busy week, not just in what we do in church but in the going to and fro of the story, Jesus moves from Bethany to Jerusalem and back again daily, and in Jerusalem moves around a lot, with the Temple as his anchor point.

And yet in all that busyness and movement we are afforded glimpses of moments of intimacy, beginning with this scene this evening from the Gospel. John's version of the anointing of Jesus is very different from the other Gospels. For a start, John places it before the Triumphal Entry, Palm Sunday. Secondly, John has it happen in a family home, Jesus' chosen family if you like, Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Thirdly, John has a friend of Jesus, Mary, anoint him, not a nameless sinful woman. All of this is for particular effect in John's story but also heightens the atmosphere of intimacy. Even more so when the foil to Mary's actions isn't the disciples as a group, nor a Pharisee, but Judas.

That this is an intimate act is beyond question, we rarely touch each other's feet in normal social interactions, which is why 'playing footsie' with someone

is the height of flirting. That Mary not only take Jesus' feet in her hands, then anoints and then wipes them with her hair is supposed to paint a highly intimate picture. Even more so with the allusions of Song of Songs, the ideas of fragrance and perfume, of touch and presence, "For your love is better than wine, your anointing oils are fragrant, your name is perfume poured out."

(Song 3:12)

We have that level of intimacy in the prophecy of Isaiah too. The Servant of the Lord that Isaiah presents is one who is intimately known by God, who intimately serves God, offers a picture of what God is offering to Israel, "I have taken you by the hand and kept you."

And Mary's is an extravagant intimacy, costly in terms of money and in potential embarrassment, more than what was needed to be done but less than what should have been done. John wants us to see this anointing in two ways: firstly as the ancient anointing of the king and secondly as an anointing for burial. John puts this before the Triumphal Entry so that Jesus enters Jerusalem as the anointed King. And as the anointed King he will die and be buried, so hastily that this anointing is the only burial anointing Jesus will receive.

Why such intimacy? Because as we begin this Holy Week we are being invited into that intimate participation of Christ's love and suffering. We are being invited not just to observe from the side lines, not to see this as a re-enactment for entertainment, but to inhabit it in a way that draws us further into God's love for us.

That is why Judas is the foil. He too is intimate with Jesus, it would be impossible not to be after 3 years together. But for Judas, this intimate act is too much, it goes against his conceptions of what power and God are, it subverts his understanding of all his ideology and theology. Which is exactly what Jesus has been doing in his teaching and ministry up to this point, and here at the final hurdle Judas cannot let his heart be enlarged enough to be subverted and transformed, to be loved extravagantly. He can only see in the extravagant outpouring of Mary waste and misuse.

As we begin this journey, fresh from the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, we are invited to look at Mary and Judas and see ourselves in both of them. To recognise when the intimacy of God is too much for us, when we feel that God's abundant love for us is a misuse of that love, when we look at the cross and see only a wasted life. And then to open ourselves to be Mary, to pour out all that we have, no holding back, no fear, no embarrassment, no shame; to

open ourselves to all that God's extravagant love has for us in this Holiest of Weeks and beyond.

Tuesday of Holy Week
I Corinthians 1:18-31
John 12:20-36

Desire.

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” The Temple and its worship was attractive to non-Jews who wanted to explore worship of God. They come to Philip, who has a Greek name and probably speaks Greek. Their desire is to see Jesus. The desire of Greeks leads to Jesus’ declaration of his desire for glory, but not the glory they expected.

In this story John wants us to hear echoes of the calling of the first disciples, Jesus’ question to them, “What are you looking for?” What is that you desire? For the first disciples it was John the Baptist’s declaration of Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, that sparked their desire to discover who Jesus was. For the Greeks, the rumour of Jesus’ ministry, teaching and signs. Their desire to see Jesus brings to fruition the hour that Jesus said was not yet, the hour of Jesus’ glory.

The desire of the Greeks is matched by Jesus’ desire now for his glory to be revealed. It’s the same desire that Judas and probably the other disciples have, to see the glory of the anointed king in all its splendour. Jesus declares “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” It feels like

the desires of the nationalists are coming to fruition, but, “the glory that Jesus desires to be seen is clearest when he is lifted up on the cross. Yet when the desire of Jesus meets the desire of others, there can be many results: rejection, hatred, misunderstanding, and confusion, as well as many sorts and strengths of trust, faith and love.”

It is why we get this short parable of the grain of wheat falling into the earth and dying. If it doesn't, Jesus says, it will stay as it always is, but if it dies, it will grow and bear fruit. The desire for life is achieved through death, the desire for honour is achieved through service, the desire to find our way is achieved by following.

Yesterday Mary pointed to Jesus' death by anointing him. Today, Jesus points to his own death by talking of being lifted from the earth. There is no path to life without the cross. There is no glory without the cross, that's what St Paul is trying to get across to the Corinthians.

The further we get into Holy Week, the greater the pull of the cross. It might sit uncomfortably with us, we might not want to hear talk of seeds dying, of hating our lives, of service and following. We might prefer the glory and the honour, the joy we know we arrive at on Easter Morning. But there is no

Easter without Good Friday, there is no Good Friday without this journey this week, there is no life without death.

Holy Week isn't just a pilgrimage for our intellects, but for our desires as well. What are you looking for? Jesus asks the first disciples, and he asks us tonight. We can take that as an immediate question, what are you looking for in this Holy Week? What do you want to get out of it, or explore, or learn, or feel? Or it can be a more searching question, what are you looking for in your faith, in your life, in your relationships, in your work, in your discipleship? What are your desires?

Too often in Christianity we talk of desire as if it is a bad thing, "the desires of the flesh." Unchecked desire can be unhealthy, of course, as anything unchecked can be. Too often we talk about bringing our desires to the cross and having them nailed there. And yet I think that as Jesus is lifted up from the earth on the cross, he calls us to bring our desires out into the open, to the light of the cross. What are you looking for? In the light of the cross can you see your desires fulfilled?

As we journey on into Holy Week can we find the space and courage to face up to the question of our desires, spoken or unspoken, fresh or long buried,

acknowledged or hidden from? Can we own them as we look at the only thing that matters, the cross? Can we see in Christ being lifted up the way through to life, to service, to honour, to discipleship and to our desires being met?

What is it you are looking for?

Wednesday of Holy Week
Isaiah 50:4-9a
John 13:21-32

Love.

As we journey closer to the Triduum, the great three days, we are drawn to the heart of the gospel, love. It is a story of love received and love rejected or violated. The readings play with our sense of time a little bit, fast forwarding to the meal that we remember tomorrow evening as we begin the Great Triduum. But we are being prepared to keep our hearts and minds open, amongst all the pain and horror that is to come, for the whispers and echoes of love.

It is at this high point of the drama that John introduces a disciple, known only by the quality of being loved by Jesus. And not only does John say, “the one who Jesus loved,” he shows us it. Unfortunately, our translation doesn’t do justice to the Greek at this point. We have that the disciple was “reclining next to Jesus,” but the force of the Greek is more “seated at table in/on the bosom of Jesus,” and “leaning back onto the bosom of Jesus.” This isn’t the first time that John has used the word “bosom” to convey the most intimate of loves. Way back at the beginning of the Gospel he talks of Jesus as the only

Son, as close to the Father's heart, literally "into the bosom of the Father." It is used to describe the ultimate intimacy of love.

Here at this table, after the example of love Jesus has just left for all the disciples, we are offered another glimpse of the intimate love that Christ offers. And even as we try to come to terms with that, we witness that love being violated and rejected.

Judas is blinded to the love on offer, he is blinkered from the intimacy there is in Jesus, his desire, at least in John, seems to be money and power. Even at this stage, he has a choice. Jesus has knelt before him, taken his feet and washed them. He has broken bread and shared it with him. He has offered him all the intimate love that he has offered everyone else, he desires Judas to be his as all the rest are. But "Judas violates the love of Jesus, which in the love between him and the Father, is at the heart of all reality, and which is also, through being loved and loving, at the heart of all human fulfilment."

Here where we should be seeing Jesus' love in all its fullness, pointing the way ahead to the love that will take him to the cross, we see betrayal of that love. It is written into our remembrance of that night. Most of our Eucharistic prayers have "on the night in which he was betrayed." Judas as the "kissing

traitor,” is the figure of our scorn. But we know it is not just Judas who betrays during this week. On Maundy Thursday whilst he slinks out of the shadows and with a kiss condemns the one he has said he would follow, 11 other men slink into the shadows, away from the one who has just washed their feet and who they said they would die for.

But Holy Week doesn't end in betrayal, it ends in love. It is not all betrayal or desertion, the women remain, their love for Jesus almost tying them to him. And that is what is offered to us, even as we know that we are both the beloved disciple and Judas. We know that like Judas we can betray, we know that sometimes that love God offers us is so expansive it is too scary. We know that the love on offer will change us. We know that we can never earn or deserve it, so sometimes we turn away from it.

And yet the journey to the cross is a journey to admit those betrayals and to offer them to the love that will dispose of them. It is the mistake that Judas makes, not waiting for the forgiveness that was coming. Because the invitation is for each of us to be the beloved disciple, to lean into the bosom of Jesus, the heart of the Father, to be caught up in the beating heart of all creation.

Tomorrow we shift up a gear as we enter the Great Triduum, the Great Three Days. As we do so, can we enter them knowing that we can bring our betrayals and exchange them for love. Can we allow ourselves to hear all of this talk of love and know it is for us too? For the love that takes Jesus to the events of the next three days is also the love that invites each of us to sit and eat and recline intimately on Jesus' breast.

Maundy Thursday
Exodus 12:1-14
Ps. 116:1, 10-end
I Corinthians 11:23-26
John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Intimacy. Desire. Love.

We have journeyed with all three so far in this Holy Week. On Monday the intimacy of Mary anointing Jesus' feet and wiping them with her hair. On Tuesday the desire of the Greeks to see Jesus, and Jesus' desire to fulfil his glory on the cross. On Wednesday the love that brings a disciple to Jesus' breast and reveals the love that is at the heart of the Godhead, at the heart of all life.

On this night all of those meet in the actions and words of Jesus as he reacts to the actions and words of those around him. Maundy Thursday has to carry a lot of symbolism, perhaps too much for us to get our heads around, so many echoes and reflections in this one night. It is easy to miss God in all of the juggling of the symbols.

We will journey with R S Thomas, the Welsh poet priest, over these next days. He writes about this feeling of not quite getting it in his poem *Via Negativa*, the Way of Negation. "The Way of Negation is a tried and tested

way to know more of the living God beyond our categories and constructs. For R S Thomas it was the only way - to look in the gaps between, to read between the lines, to crucify all false expectations.”¹

*Why no! I never thought other than
That God is that great absence
In our lives, the empty silence
Within, the place where we go
Seeking, not in hope to
Arrive or find.
He keeps the interstices
In our knowledge, the darkness
Between stars.
His are the echoes
We follow, the footprints he has just
Left. We put our hands in His side hoping to find
It warm. We look at people
And places as though he had looked
At them, too; but miss the reflection.*

¹ Revd Canon Dr Roland Riem, *Holy Week Reflections 2021*,

“His are the echoes we follow ... the footprints he has just left ... but we miss the reflection.”

Like Peter, struggling with Jesus kneeling to wash feet; like Judas struggling with Jesus' refusal to seize power; like all the disciples struggling with what is going on, there is too much to take in on this night.

Firstly, there is the symbolism of the Passover, that's why we read Exodus and remind ourselves of the liberation of the people of Israel. The Passover meal, the sacrifice of the lambs, the exodus, have all been there in the background of John's gospel from the beginning, “behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” And now we come to “the hour”, Jesus' own exodus, his departure from life. In John's gospel Jesus dies at the moment of the sacrifice of the Passover lambs, central to the meal commemorating the final night of the people of Israel in Egypt.

Secondly, there is the act of foot washing. John is alone in including this in the story of this night, while Luke has Jesus talk about greatness and service, John has Jesus demonstrate it. Each year we are reminded of Jesus acting out his whole incarnation and ministry, as he takes off his robes, kneels, and one by one takes every disciple's foot.

Thirdly, we have the institution of the Eucharist, the Last Supper, which John doesn't feature. We give thanks for the meal at which Jesus tells us to take the bread as his body broken for us and to take the wine as his blood shed for us.

Fourthly, we have the new commandment, where today gets its name from. Commandment is *mandatum*, which becomes Maundy Thursday, the day of new commandments. And this new commandment? Love one another, just as Christ has loved us.

Fifthly, we have the garden of Gethsemane, the arrest, the trial that leads us into Good Friday morning. We commemorate that by stripping the altar at the end of the service, by transferring the Blessed Sacrament to the garden of repose, by watching as the disciples did as we remember the events of that night, and by leaving in darkness with no blessing or sending out.

What we begin this night as the sun sets, with these acts, does not finish until we receive the blessing at the end of the Easter Vigil as the sun rises. But in another sense what begins this night will never finish: complete and utter love, intimate, vulnerable, personal and mutual. So often though we miss the reflection, don't hear the echo, ignore the footprints.

Peter says, you will not wash my feet. We say it too, not just because we're too British to take our shoes off, but because we miss the reflection of Jesus' servanthood, we miss the echo of his self-giving love in amongst theories of appeasing sacrifice to a wrathful God. Then Peter says, not just my feet but all of me. We say it too when we want Jesus to be our magic charm, our get out of jail card, our protector, and we miss the footsteps that willingly lead to suffering and to the cross.

“Christ was very straight with Peter’s ignorance and desire. He needed to be cleansed, whether he understood it or not. He needed to accept the sign that he was cleansed, whether he was prepared to receive it gladly or not. Peter needed to meet Christ on His elusive terms, on the terms of Christ’s cleansing. If we want to know God, we must learn the ways of God – in echoes, footprints, and signs like the towel that Christ takes up and puts to our feet. It is a scandal that Christ should take hold of our feet when we have so much more engaging and attractive elements to our personalities with which to impress him. But he offers no more nor less than what we need to be part of Him.”²

² Roland Riems

Oil, water, towels, bread and wine the echoes of God's self-giving grace and life in Christ through the Spirit. The reflections of how God has looked at the world and responded. Tonight, we move through those symbols of the love that Jesus shows us until we gather tomorrow at the foot of the cross. We can do that however we want, by taking part, by sitting quietly, by reflecting on our own. And like Peter, like the Way of Negation, we can do it even if we don't quite understand it, if we can't quite grasp the nuance, if all we can see is the darkness between the stars.

However we do it, tonight is the invitation to follow the footsteps that Christ has left, to receive that love that Jesus has for you, to renew our call to love each other, and to use all that to let the world know that Jesus loves us, to the end. It is a simple act, undo your laces or your buckles, take off your sock; as simple as kneeling or bowing at the altar and putting out your hands. Whether we fully grasp what we are doing or not, we simply respond to the echo of God's love.

Intimacy. Desire. Love. In oil blessed, feet held and washed, and in bread broken and wine outpoured Jesus shows us all of them and shows us that all of them find their fulfilment in him. Come, follow the echo of God, see where Christ's footsteps will lead you on this holy night.

Good Friday
Isaiah 52:13-53:end
Psalm 22
Hebrews 10:16-25
John 18:1 – 19:end

“Who are you looking for?”

In amongst all the words we have heard since Palm Sunday, the number of times we have heard this passion account, it is easy to miss the details. In amongst all the questions thrown at Jesus from confused disciples, enraged religious leaders, and terrified rulers stands this one question of Jesus to them, and to us.

“Who are you looking for?”

The account of the Passion we have heard sung is typically Johannine. Here are the details we may have missed. Judas and the crowd come to Jesus in the shadows, Jesus steps out of the shadows to meet them. A man fearing for his life, wanting to put this off would have done as the disciples do and fled back to a locked room. But Jesus meets his accusers, the mob who have come for blood.

“Who are you looking for?”

These small details set the tone for this day, Good Friday. Many of us struggle with a day like this being called good, we struggle with the imagery of a cross, an implement of torture, we struggle with an innocent victim being sent to a gruesome and bloody death. And we should. But it happens every day, not in the headlines we read, not in the online sources we find, not in the wider conscience of our society, but it does. Jesus is not unique in what happens to him today.

But he is unique in why it happens.

“Who are you looking for?”

If we have come to find an innocent victim being sacrificed to appease an angry God, then we will not find him here.

If we have come to find a naïve do-gooder manipulated and sacrificed by a fundamentalist regime we will not find him here.

If we have come to find a religious teacher who made the wrong enemies and unknowingly stumbled into a death trap, we will not find him here.

“Who are you looking for?”

Our companion through the Triduum is R S Thomas. In his poem *The Coming*, he presents a different Jesus that we can look for

And God held in his hand
A small globe. Look he said.
The son looked. Far off,
As through water, he saw
A scorched land of fierce
Colour. The light burned
There; crusted buildings
Cast their shadows: a bright
Serpent, A river
Uncoiled itself, radiant
With slime.
On a bare
Hill a bare tree saddened
The sky. many People
Held out their thin arms
To it, as though waiting
For a vanished April
To return to its crossed

Boughs. The son watched
Them. Let me go there, he said.

We have journeyed this week with intimacy, desire and love, and with the opposites of those, with denial, shame and betrayal.

Harmful Christian theology tells us God is angry at us and sends his innocent Son to die for us to stop that anger. That thinking leads to theologies of vengeance, of bombing girls' schools, of invoking a God of anger and violence against your enemies, of passing capital punishment laws that only apply to one ethnicity and celebrate it with champagne, of allowing anger and wrath to be valid responses to any slights to us. That theology is far away from a God of intimacy, desire and love. That is not a God who says, "let me go there."

In the Passion Narrative we see the diverse group of religious leaders suddenly come together, as the High Priest Caiphas declares, "it is better for one man to die for the people than the whole nation perish." The French thinker Rene Girard spent a lifetime studying this pattern that he termed, "the scapegoat mechanism". The Jesuit theologian Raymund Schwager took this insight and brought it into sustained conversation with Scripture. Schwager read the entire biblical narrative as a long, uneven, sometimes faltering movement toward the

exposure of this mechanism – from the story of Cain and Abel, through the Psalms and the Wisdom literature, through the Servant Songs of Isaiah, arriving finally at the Passion of Christ. There are moments in the Hebrew Scriptures where the mechanism is glimpsed, where the text briefly takes the victim's side. But Schwager argued that these insights remain partial and contested until Christ, where the exposure becomes total and irreversible.

Schwager drew heavily on Isaiah 53, arguing that where we read about God's violence in Scripture, what we are almost always encountering is human violence that has been misinterpreted as divine action. Isaiah 53 is the moment where that misattribution begins to crack open, and in this garden scene in John's Gospel this is taken further: the brute force of corrupted human power is on display for all to see.

“Let me go there.”

“Who are you looking for?”

If we are looking for someone to blame for rising oil prices, lack of employment or housing, feelings of hurt or betrayal it is easy to look at a dangerously unstable administration, a fundamentalist state, those who are

different from us, those who have hurt us. But Jesus shows us where that leads.

As our focus remains on the cross for this time, we need to see in it the fulfilment of all that we have journeyed with this week.

Intimacy. Desire. Love.

It is the intimacy that Christ has for all creation that brings the Incarnation.

It is the desire that Christ has for all humanity to know God's healing that brings his suffering.

It is the love that Christ has for all the universe that brings the cross.

As we come to the cross this morning in whatever way we are comfortable with, we are invited to see it as the ultimate love of God in Christ. Intimacy, desire and love converge here. Jesus' "let me go there" leads here because we need it to not God.

"Who are you looking for?" Jesus invites us to hand over to the cross all that we cannot, or do not wish to, carry anymore. All our striving, our failing, our sin, our grief, our anxiety, our bewilderment can be handed over; all our looking for someone to blame, even ourselves, is met here. At the cross that

stands as the sign of God's ultimate intimacy, desire and love that takes all we hand over, including our very lives.