

## To Parishoners and friends of Merrylea Parish Church from the Locum, the Reverend Jim Gibson.

Sunday, 29<sup>th</sup> March 2020  
Passion Sunday.

*Reading:* St. John's Gospel, chapter 12, verses 1 – 8.

### **Jesus anointed at Bethany**

Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honour. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took about half a litre of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, 'Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages. He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

'Leave her alone,' Jesus replied. 'It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me.'

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How *do* you shut down a whole country? Particularly one whose every ethos has, for centuries, been based on the freedom of the individual?

These last days, that's been the dilemma of both Prime Minister in Westminster and First Minister in Edinburgh. Actions have been taken that previously would have been unthinkable: schools and universities closed, pubs and theatres shut, churches unable to hold worship, industry halted and worker's wages paid by the Government while the majority of the public is ordered to stay at home. In the unseen face of Covid-19 (coronavirus) politicians and their scientific advisers are now making decisions on which lives depend. In a matter of a few days, not only has our way of life become unprecedented but counter-intuitive. As a nation, we have embarked on a journey of uncertain experience and conclusion.

Today, is a kind of watershed. The season of Lent comes to its close. It's the Sunday before Palm Sunday and that brings the re-focusing of our thinking towards the events of that first Holy Week and Easter. Because of that, today is called Passion Sunday. It's the beginning of a journey we are all invited to make. One of uncertain experience and whose conclusion is counter-intuitive.

Our journey reminds us of that very tender, touching story of Jesus at dinner with Martha, Mary and Lazarus when Mary anoints Jesus with extremely expensive perfume. It's a story I used to find both *unsettling* and *moving* but, now in older age, I find simply *moving*.

Recently, I re-read that marvellous book by Sally Magnusson entitled *Where Memories Go*. A gripping, emotional roller-coaster telling of her mother's journey into the recesses of dementia and her family's struggle to come to terms with all that happened. It's a book that

questions how our society cares for elderly people, particularly the 800,000 people in the UK who are dementia sufferers. Questions like:

Do you remain yourself or does your increasing loss of memory rob you of your true identity?

What is the point of visiting someone if they can't remember the visit 30 seconds later?

What does it mean to experience God's presence if you can't remember who God is, never mind who *you* are?

I don't have the answers but, I know, we need to ask the questions.

What I do know is that, if this coronavirus pandemic can bring any good at all, perhaps it can remind us of basic things long ignored: that far from there being no such thing as society, only individual men and women living in families; the reality is we depend upon one another for just about everything that makes life not only bearable but possible. Even if the Prime Minister has had to discover that sometimes people have to be made to do the right thing for the common good.

As people of faith, we would add we also depend on a God experienced and known through love. And, if Jesus' passion and death teaches anything, it teaches that God's care, compassion and love do not depend either on our intellectual capacity nor on how much we can remember.

On this Passion Sunday, we are reminded that our *status*, our *identity*, our *humanity* can never be taken away from us whether by other people or diseases such as dementia or Covid-19. That which makes us the person we truly are belongs to God and is held by God.

In this lies our confidence and our hope.

No matter whether you cannot remember who God is: God remembers who you are.

Is that not worth the most expensive perfume in the world?

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### *Prayer:*

Lord Jesus Christ, though easier paths beckoned and friends pleaded for you to stay with them, you turned towards Jerusalem determined to face whatever lay in wait for you. As our nation further prepares for the threat of unseen disease and we self-isolate for our own protection, may we gain strength that by your own example you have shown how love endures all things. Our call to love is known in both the simple and the complex – from adding extra items to an online shopping order for the foodbank, to offering our particular advice or skills to the benefit of others within all parts of our society and community. Receive our prayer especially for those alone and afraid; fearful and anxious not just for themselves but for loved ones near and far. May your spirit of wisdom and compassion dwell upon all who carry the burden of great responsibility on behalf of others, so that hard decisions may be taken in order that lives may be saved and this overshadowing threat eradicated.

For myself, I pray for peace of mind and calmness of soul. Though life's path may be difficult in demand and hard to endure at this time, your love is still known through each act of love and compassion shown. And so, we sum up our prayers by saying the words of Christ himself: Our Father in heaven hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive

those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever. AMEN.