

Reflections for *Lent at a Distance*

Sunday, April 5, 2020

As we begin our “worship at a distance”, I would like to have us sing/read the hymn, *Hosanna, Loud Hosanna* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dEPSQyVgXhw>). This is worth turning up the volume—it is quite majestic!

Hosanna, loud hosanna the little children sang;
through pillared court and temple the lovely anthem rang.
To Jesus, who had blessed them, close folded to his breast,
the children sang their praises, the simplest and the best.
From Olivet they followed mid an exultant crowd,
the victory palm branch waving, and chanting clear and loud.
The Lord of earth and heaven rode on in lowly state,
nor scorned that little children should on his bidding wait.
"Hosanna in the highest!" That ancient song we sing,
for Christ is our Redeemer, the Lord of heaven, our King.
O may we ever praise him with heart and life and voice,
and in his blissful presence eternally rejoice.

Words: *Jenette Threlfall, 1873*

Music: *Gesangbuch der Herzogl, 1784*

As I mentioned last couple of weeks, I re-discovered a newsletter from Sergey Rybikov, the then-president of Donetsk Christian University, written in 2009. At that time Ukraine was dealing with the natural gas crisis, with both restrictions on availability, and a great debt enforced by Russia, the seller and supplier, resulting in much worry in the country. Here are the last two parts of what Sergey wrote:

We must live by faith in order to take active steps forward. “Faith without works is dead” (James 2.17). Our faith does not give us the right to be passive but gives us motivation to be victorious in battle.

We must take the path of renewing our minds to be active and creative in seeking solutions. We need to rethink priorities in both our personal lives, and ministry. We must change the way we use our time and resources so that the most important and strategic tasks are given priority (Colossians 4.5). we must be careful and effective with our resources so that “nothing (is) wasted” (John 6.12).

In his context, the people of Ukraine were not housebound by outward restrictions as we are—they were free to move about. But we have an affluence and many resources that they did not. May we be active, not passive, and creative in our activity. Our priority should not be just to get through, but to thrive with what wonderful things God has already given us for ourselves, and for others.

For prayer concerns:

Personal Needs

Reinhard Fabiunke

Maria Perez

Bruno & Iris Schwaigert

United States

Johanna Majorana

Those affected by the virus worldwide

Ministry Needs

Mark & Elke Karan (Wycliffe)

Tafadzwanashe Tadeyo (Zimbabwe)

Resurrection Church (Ukraine)

House of Hope & the Alencars (Brazil)

Liberty Corner Mission

Liberty Corner Bible Church

For now, let us turn to the meditation for the morning.

Scripture Reading

John 12.1-8

Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. ²So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table. ³Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, ⁵"Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" ⁶He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it. ⁷Jesus said, "Leave her alone, she kept it for the day of my burial. ⁸For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me."

The Difference of Three Heart Conditions

...out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks. Luke 6.45

If you were looking forward to a Palm Sunday sermon, this year you will have to look elsewhere. (At least the starting hymn is set for Palm Sunday!) I thought it better to continue where we left off last week in the gospel of John, following the raising of Lazarus. Between last week's reading (John 11.1-44) and this week's there was significant discussion by the Jewish leadership about the problem that Jesus had become for them. The discussion included the beginnings of the scheme to put him to death. Jesus and his disciples had settled for a time in the town of Ephraim, about 20 miles north of Jerusalem.

As John records his account, after describing the general interest in whether or not Jesus would come to the Passover, the gospel continues with Jesus arriving in Bethany just 6 days before the Passover itself. A meal is planned, and Jesus is apparently the guest of honor. Mary enters the room, breaks open an alabaster jar of expensive, aromatic ointment and pours it on Jesus' feet, wiping it in with her hair. And then the discussion begins.

Have you ever noticed that 2 or more people can see the same event or situation, hear the same conversation, and interpret that event or conversation in very different ways? So it seems in this situation.

The event: Mary anointing Jesus' feet.

Although we cannot see into her heart, it is not impossible consider that the immediate cause of her act of worship is her gratitude for Jesus raising of her brother Lazarus, the most recent earlier event in John's gospel. It is evident that she cares deeply for her brother, and thus gratitude should not be unexpected at such a celebratory meal.

Judas' interpretation: An expensive waste! Instead of anointing feet, the ointment would have been better sold and the cash placed in "his" money bag. Indeed, the value was that of 300 denarii, one denarius being the wage of the average laborer. Of course it is here that John, in reflection many years later, was able to state that Judas was a thief who used to help himself to the common purse. He really cared nothing for the poor, even though that may well have been part of the purpose for the funds which he carried. And thus the loss of that potential money brought out the critical comment.

The Disciples' interpretation: Mark 14.4 tells us that "some" of the disciples joined in the criticism of Mary; Matthew 26.8 says "they", perhaps implying all 12 joined in together. Whether some or all, they echo Judas' sentiments of the wastefulness of Mary's act.

Jesus' interpretation: It is interesting to me how Jesus responded here. Had it been me, I would have pointed out that since the alabaster jar of nard was Mary's, she could do with it as she liked. Certainly true. But that truth is overshadowed by a more important truth.

After telling Judas to leave her alone, Jesus gave a very meaningful explanation for what she is doing: she is anointing him beforehand for his coming death. Those feet which had so recently been washed by a household servant before they all reclined to eat, were now anointed with one of the most powerful spices of the East.

Those same feet, in a matter of a few days, would bare the extra load of a cross being carried on the Via Dolorosa to Golgotha, and there have spikes driven through them.

Those feet were just anointed in a costly act of worship of the One who would soon provide for the most priceless salvation ever conceived.

Jesus understands all that is coming. He has known it from eternity, and has been preparing his disciples for that experience for several weeks. And so he reveals again to those in the room what is to come: his death, and his absence from them.

The 3 Heart Conditions: *What we see, and how we see, is often not so much a matter of the eyes, but of the heart. For it is not just the event or action, but the correct interpretation of the event or action that will make the difference to me.* In this gospel account, one heart grieves what it will lose; another covets what it cannot have; other hearts simply complain as well.

Judas: He is elsewhere described as the “son of perdition” who is lost. One of the 12, yet lost. It is not the time spent as a disciple that matters, for he was with the group the whole time. He saw the miracles, the healings, heard the teachings. Yet he is lost. It is a matter of what has happened in your heart while being a disciple, not just being there.

His lostness is evident in his covetousness that goes unchecked. He was a thief, yes, but worst of all, a lost thief. His heart was cold to spiritual things. So cold, in fact, that Mark records that after this dinner and Jesus’ rebuke, Judas went to the chief priests so as to betray Jesus to them. Even knowing the coming death of Jesus, Judas willingly participated in that murderous scheme.

The Rest of the Disciples: Unlike Judas, there is no evidence that any were lost. In fact, even though they would all abandon their Rabbi in the garden, they would return, and be ministers of the gospel to the waiting world. How then could they join in the rebuke? Were they also thieves? Were they equally covetous?

I suspect the answer to those questions is “no.” So how could they be so critical of Mary in her act of worship? Unfortunately it is fairly easy to “pile on” at such a time when we do not understand what is really happening. Perhaps all they could see was an overly emotional worshipper who gave something extremely valuable, and in the morning would regret it.

Because they could not see her heart.

Because they did not really understand what Jesus was all about.

Unfortunately, it is fairly easy to fall into the “group think” when you don’t really understand what you have just witnessed, or what is coming in just a few days.

Mary:

Who would you imagine would understand the coming death of Jesus better than the disciples whom Jesus had been instructing for several weeks as they made their way from the Mount of Transfiguration to Jerusalem? All along the way he described what would happen to him, and who the persecutors would be.

Yet in this one event, Mary displays more understanding than the 12. Whether she fully understands all that is coming, or simply comes to worship in gratitude, John does not reveal to us here. But clearly she understands who Jesus is, and something about his great sacrifice to come in a matter of days. We should not forget that it was Mary who sat at Jesus’ feet while he taught, and her sister Martha served the table. And as we remember that event, we will also remember that Jesus rebuked Martha, and commended Mary as choosing the better option that day.

So how do I fit into this this narrative? How do any of us fit?

How do I see things? Certainly not just with the physical eyes, but with the eyes of my heart.

If I were to have been at that meal just days before Passover, which character would I have played? How would I have seen Mary's wonderful gift?

Am I Mary, who worships out of a grateful heart both for what I have received, and what I will receive when our redemption is completed at his coming? Is my heart open to who Jesus really is, and the comparative, infinitesimal value of all else? Do I really understand who great a Savior I have?

Am I lost Judas? Critical—not so much over the act of worship I witness as over the loss of something that wasn't mine, and never would be mine? Does my coveting reveal a coldness deep within that is rooted in the death of my soul? Do I scorn the holy that is before me because I am so lost I don't know what holiness is, what deep worship really is, or what salvation is?

Do I stand in the crowd—vocal, to some extent, against the passionate worship of others that I witness: their heartfelt giving what they have and who they are, and echo the voice of the dead one who condemns because I myself do not understand what is really happening?

If I belong to Christ, if I have been made alive in him, I won't be in the second category—that of lost Judas. But I can be in the third, larger group, who sees, but does not see clearly or deeply enough to understand what is really happening. Who condemns the passion of others as being misguided not because they *are* misguided, but because my own passion has chilled, my life having been caught up in the weeds and thorns: the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches (**Matthew 13.22**).

Even as a believer I can stand condemned for my loss of passion, my criticism of holy acts. *The good person out of the treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart, his mouth speaks.*” (**Luke 6.45**)

It is for that reason that the counsel of **Proverbs 4.23**: *Keep (guard) your heart with all diligence, for out of it flow the springs of life.*

Judas could not keep—guard—his dead heart. The other disciples, and Mary could.

And as a believer, so can I. And so can you.

Father, remove the heart of stone, and give me a heart of flesh. I confess my coldness which comes because I have not sat at your feet for a while. I confess my criticism over what I do not understand, because I do not seek your heart. I confess my seeking the things of this life over the things of eternity.

Open the eyes of my heart to see truly. Restore the joy of my salvation to me which I have lost because of my willful wandering. Here is my heart—take and seal it to yourself. Refresh me with the knowledge of what my salvation cost your son, and the deep love that you have for me in Christ.

I pray these things in his great name.

Amen.

I suggest two hymns for our closing:

Create In Me A Clean Heart (<https://www.hymnal.net/en/hymn/ns/51>); where you see “Test/Piano/Guitar”, click on either piano or guitar for the music.

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.
Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.
Cast me not away from Thy presence;
take not Thy holy Spirit from me.
Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation;
and renew a right spirit within me.

Words: *Keith Green (Psalm 51.10-12)*

Music: *Keith Green, © 1984*

My God I Love Thee (https://hymnary.org/tune/kingsfold_english) This is also #30 in our song books.

My God, I love Thee; not because I hope for heav'n thereby,
nor yet for fear that loving not I might forever die;
but for that Thou didst all mankind upon the cross embrace;
for us didst bear the nails and spear, and manifold disgrace;
And griefs and torments numberless, and sweat of agony;
e'en death itself, and all for man, who was Thine enemy.
Then why, most loving Jesus Christ, should I not love Thee well?
Not for the sake of winning heav'n, nor any fear of hell;
Not with the hope of gaining aught, nor seeking a reward,
but as Thyself hast loved me, O ever-loving Lord!
E'en so I love Thee, and will love, and in Thy praise will sing,
solely because Thou art my God and my eternal King!

Words: *Francis Xavier, 1506-1552* Music: *Kingsfold, traditional English melody*