

St Andrews on The Terrace, Wellington
30 August 2020 – Pentecost 13
Rev Dr Niki Francis

Matthew 26:6-13

The Gospel reading we have heard today normally belongs in the Passion narrative, leading up to Easter, but these days normal is out the window.

Early in the week I read the lectionary readings for today and reflected on how I might relate them to our lives at the moment. I wasn't having much luck and one of my favourite biblical stories sprang into my mind: the story of the woman who anointed Jesus at Bethany just prior to the crucifixion. I like it for its sensuousness, tenderness, for the woman's courage and compassion.

The story features in all four Gospels. In Matthew and Mark the woman anoints Jesus's head, in Luke and John she anoints his feet. The woman has no name in Matthew, Mark or Luke. In John, she is named as Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus of Bethany. She has no voice in any of the accounts. But her actions are authoritative. She recognises Jesus's suffering and reaches out courageously and generously to offer compassion. The woman's actions contrast with the disciples and Jesus's opponents.

There's a lot to this story, and not the time to go into it all this morning. I want to focus on the generosity and timing, based on Jesus's words "she has done a beautiful thing", and "you will always have the poor, you won't always have me".

But first, let's go back to Bethany: Picture the scene two thousand years ago: huge crowds of Jewish pilgrims flock to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover feast. There isn't enough space in Jerusalem for them all, so many stay in Bethany on the south-eastern slope of the Mount of Olives, 2 or 3 kilometres from Jerusalem. Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem was marred by the indignant reaction of the chief priests and scribes and the plots to kill him, but he found a haven in Bethany. The tensions show in Jesus's drawn face and the smudgy shadows under his eyes.

In the house of Simon the Leper, Jesus and his friends recline on the earth-pressed floor; they talk among themselves as they eat a simple meal that would have included bread and wine, possibly a little fish and some olives, maybe dates or grapes or soft white cheese.

A woman with an alabaster jar enters the house, walks over to Jesus, breaks the jar and pours precious perfumed oil over his head. In Luke and John, the perfume is named as nard, a valuable musk-scented oil. The quantity of nard with which the woman anointed Jesus was worth the equivalent of one year's wages of an average Roman labourer.

The woman anoints Jesus with the oil in a prophetic foreshadowing of his death. The musky fragrance fills the room.

The disciples are indignant:

Why this waste?

This ointment might have been sold
for a large sum and given to the poor.

Their response seems to me to be a knee-jerk, narrow reaction. Yes, it might seem a waste, but only if you don't consider the wider picture: the threats on Jesus's life, the Jewish practice of anointing for burial the messianic symbol of anointing with precious oil.

So, Jesus asks why they bother the woman,
she has done a beautiful thing to me.
You will always have the poor with you,
but you will not always have me.

The 'beautiful thing' is about kindness and generosity. The statement you won't always have me" is about timing. The latter is one of the great truths of life. Some things we can do almost any time, others need to be done now, in the present – before the moment passes. We are aware time is a factor here because we know the story – Jesus is about to die on the cross.

As well as timing, the story is one of huge generosity. It is one of magnanimity.

We have seen examples of generosity and magnanimity in Aotearoa New Zealand in the past week.

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During the sentencing of the Christchurch terrorist, family and friends of victims read victim impact statements. This would have taken much courage – facing their loved ones' murderer, full of grief shadowed by the horror at the way their loved ones died, knowing that they were being filmed and that footage was being shown the world over. We heard a range of emotional responses to the terrorist, of course. We all respond in our own ways to grief and trauma.

One response I thought was extraordinarily generous was that of Janna Ezat whose 35-year-old son Hussein Al-Umari was one of the 51 people murdered by the terrorist. Janna Ezat told how her sons' bullet riddled body was delivered to her on her birthday, which was also Mother's Day in the Middle East. She told the terrorist:

He used to give me flowers for my birthday but instead I got his body,"

Ezat described her son as kind, humble, caring and hard-working, a young man who had the rare gift of making everyone feel special, loved and appreciated.

And then, at the end of her statement, she said to the terrorist:

"I decided to forgive you ... because I don't have hate ... I have no choice."

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Another example is the huge generosity, the magnanimity of the school students in our country who either give up school, or work graveyard shifts and try to continue at school, to help support their families when parents have lost jobs or had hours cut because of the pandemic.

These stories have particularly come out of the Pasifika community in South Auckland, currently suffering much with the Covid-19 outbreak, but they are not confined to there. You may have

heard John Campbell interview some of the students on his Breakfast show during the week. They are an impressive bunch who fill me with hope for the future of Aotearoa New Zealand.

After the level 4 lockdown, the principal of Manurewa College, a decile 1 school in South Auckland, reported that around 200 children had left school to take up work to support their families.

In May, on the day pupils returned to school at the end of our nationwide Level 4 lockdown, Aigagalefili Fepulea'i Tapua'i, head girl of Aorere College, a decile 2 school in Papatoetoe, South Auckland wrote an Instagram post on the same issue. The post went viral. Fili, as she calls herself, wrote:

Our decile 2 school opened today. Spent it watching people swap leavers' notices for CVs cuz money is low and mouths gotta eat.

At Fili's school, Aorere College, at Manurewa College, and at many low decile schools throughout Aotearoa New Zealand, school children worked through Level 4 lockdown in jobs that enabled us to continue to get our groceries – on supermarket checkouts, stocking shelves, packing shopping, cleaning supermarkets to make them safe for shoppers. Or they took care of their younger siblings so parents could work. They were essential workers doing jobs that kept New Zealand going – low paid jobs that are high risk during a pandemic because of their interaction with the public. Jobs that people were and are abused in, as if they have made the rules, by people not willing to follow the rules intended to keep us all safe.

In Auckland, more students are leaving school now, as more jobs are lost as an inevitable result of the pandemic and some employers are keen to employ younger workers at a lower wage. In a more recent Instagram post, Fili described how she watches her friends “bury their youth in every graveyard shift”. She describes their struggles to keep studying and working – they want to help their families when parents have lost their jobs, but they have their own dreams for the future, dreams which require education.

Fili describes the students' selfless actions as the biggest acts of sacrifice and love.

And aren't they? I don't want to romanticise these young people's generosity and sacrifice. There is nothing romantic about a young person giving up their dreams, giving up education because somebody needs to put food on the family's table or pay the power bill. Through no fault of their own – simply because of the pandemic. It's a tragedy that we live in a country with such economic inequality that this happens.

And yet, in the same way the disciples criticised the woman's generosity in anointing Jesus with the valuable nard, other New Zealanders have criticised the Pasifika community for the fact children are leaving school to help support their families. Critics ignore the economic inequality in Aotearoa New Zealand, the systemic and institutionalised racism that the Pasifika community lives with – conditions that create the conditions whereby secondary school students make these decisions out of love for their families.

These amazing young people display loyalty to their families, and a strong work ethic. They make these decisions and forgo their dreams because, as Fili said, they don't want to watch their families go without food or heating during winter if they can do something to avoid that.

Those students who continue to study while working graveyard shifts receive no recognition from NZQA for their difficult context. Yet they may be working 20 to 40 hours per week, then getting up in the morning to go to school. It would be good to see NZQA display compassion and recognise the additional huge challenges faced by these students who are a shining light of loyalty, love and family values in Aotearoa New Zealand. They are shining lights of loyalty, love and family values in Aotearoa New Zealand. They are luminous examples of generosity and kindness and magnanimous giving. They, and the conditions in our country that demand such sacrifice from our some of our young people give us much food for thought, reflection and hopefully action “cuz money is low and mouths gotta eat.”

*Amen*