

The Story of The Perfume

To come into this story,

You have to know the story of what has happened with John and his telling of the story.

He has changed.

There is a new intensity here.

The first part of the book is "This is who I am", see what it is I am doing.

The second part of the book is "This is where I am headed". That is where I going, I am going to cross, I am going to be lifted up, I am going to die.

And in John this does not have the same sense of bleak tragedy that it does in Mark

Instead in John, there is a sense of purpose

There is a sense that in going to this place, God has this, and we do not need to be afraid, he is holding onto this doom in all of its strangeness.

I don't know if you have had the experience of getting older

And thinking

I know where this is headed, I know what is coming my way

And the invitation here is to say "God is holding on this, God has this".

God has something more here too

God is holding onto a death that is going to mean something.

We are asked to hold on to that part of the story.

In the reading of the story today, it happens with the simple phrase at the start of chapter 12

"It was 6 days before Passover"

Passover is the place where the lamb wins you freedom

The story is that way back in Egypt the people were slaves,

And their freedom is going to be won with the death of the firstborn in Egypt

And to escape from that they are to place the blood of a lamb on their doorway

For death will pass by when there is blood of the lamb on the doorway.

And this is the story that is looming here
And he is going to be the lamb.
We have to get into that part of the story
That he is going to be the lamb the one who saves us.

This is where the story must be more than sensual kindness
It is understanding that he is going to become the Passover lamb,
He is going to do the thing that is going to get us to freedom.

What is the thing that you most desire for your freedom
He is the one who is going to get you there...

You have come in here with a bunch of desires
You have come in with a sense of your own fears
You have come with a sense of your own failures
You have come with a sense that you do not deserve any goodness from God
In fact you feel that you have come with a sense of failure
And the story is that the lamb is going to get you there.

And the one who sees this is Mary.

There are two things about Mary.
The first is that she senses a deep connection with Jesus.
She is profoundly interested in who he is,
What she is has to say,
She has become fascinated with Jesus.

The other thing about Mary is that he has healed her brother.

Imagine that, the very worst thing has happened to Mary
She has lost her brother
She and Martha have no other safety in this culture
And I don't mean the safety of finance, although that is there
I mean the sense of someone in the world who is there for them,
Who gets them
Who holds them
Who is around them

And he is gone. And Lazarus must have been particularly loveable, because we hear that Jesus loved him, something about Lazarus is wonderful.

And he is gone,
And though he was delayed far too long
Jesus did eventually come and brought him back.

Imagine that - Jesus is the thing who did the thing you really needed.
So you have this profound sense of love for Jesus
And gratitude for Jesus.

With Lazarus, he will prepare the meal and eat with him
With Martha, she will serve - Martha will throw herself into that.
But she, Mary, will do something else.

The story in John takes it's time of all the different things she does.

Whilst at meal,
She takes a pound of costly perfume,
Pure nard
This has come from India.
It is the most precious thing that she owns - I don't know why she even has it,
Who has that perfume around, why did she buy it,
Did she just know that one day she would give to him
Or hope that one day she would give it someone else.

And at the table
She anoints Jesus feet,
And she wipes them with her hair.

Because something in Jesus is profoundly got by her
She really understands
And with that understanding comes deep love.

I want us to try and connect this morning with that sense of loving Jesus
Knowing him
For that is our faith
He is the one who does the thing we most need

The thing we most burn for
And she pours this on his feet
There is something significant about pouring this all out
Of the way that the house is filled
And she wipes it with her hair...

This is the story that we are told as we get ready for Passover.

I once enacted a drama of this moment,
Where I was to be Jesus
And it was in Woodlands Methodist Church in Glasgow
And I was to be Jesus,
And a physiotherapist called Mandy was to be the woman, to be Mary
And I remember the feel of the hands, on my head
I remember that even as an actor, I felt exposed.

But for years after I always felt this sense of connection with the Mandy
I saw her recently at a funeral
And I always remember the moment, even though it was 30 years ago.

But I think something about him
Who was so able to zone out of human approval
And into human love
He moved into this space
And the two of them moved into this space

This was surely deeply embarrassing for everyone
Everyone in every version of this story is appalled.

She wipes the feet with her hair
But he seems to have the ability to enjoy it
This is a different kind of Jesus, that you are dealing with here.

And she understands as well what this is
She understands that he demands that we were one another
Which is why the word for wiping of the feet which will happen in the next chapter,
Is exactly the same - there are two foot washings John
This is the first one from Mary

And the second one, the even more famous one will happen in the next chapter.

She understands that discipleship means acts of deep devotion to one another.

Of a kindness and concern for him

For each other

Footwashing kindness,

That is what we are to each other, that fundamental sense of giving,

And doing something beautiful for one another

This is much more than simply be nice to one another.

It's that intensity of devotion...

"the pagan Caecilius criticized the Christians because "hardly have they met when they love each other.... Indiscriminately they call each other brother and sister."

This requires a great deal of trust,

It requires that somehow that Jesus is at the heart of this,

To be able to love one another...

To love without fear,

To know that this is the deepest thing.

The first thing I think is gratitude

He did the thing I most needed and prayed for.

The second thing is that she knows that this is how we are to be with one another

To love

To love indiscriminately.

The final thing is that she knows that this is where she is headed

Deep down she knows that he is the lamb who is going to die

She knows that the death and revival of her brother

Is also going to be what he is ready for.

He goes ahead to die for us

Paul talked about this

This mystery
That for a good person, seldom will anyone die
But for bad person, no one dies
But this is the love
That whilst we were still sinners
Christ dies for us
He goes ahead for us to die for
You know that person that came in her today
With all their fears
And their anger
And their sins
He dies for that person
Mary got that
She knew what was to be love by him.

I think the story of Maximilian Kolbe
He was a Polish Catholic Priest and Franciscan Friar,
Born in 1894, he was a very intensely passionate man
He was a missionary to the Far East to China, sharing the Catholic faith
He was also strongly committed to his beliefs
Such that when the Germans invaded Poland
He refused to sign a document that would give him German citizenship
And also published anti-nazi publications from the monastery
He was eventually arrested for this and taken to Auschwitz.
There he was often beaten, but continued to minister to the fellow prisoners.

One day in 1941 another prisoner had escaped - in order to take reprisals for this the
deputy commandant decreed that another 10 prisoners would be executed - starved and
deprived of water to death in a underground bunker.

When one of the men Franciszek Gajowniczek went, he cried out "My wife, My children"
At this Maximilian volunteered to take his place
In the bunker, he was still alive after 10 days, leading the other prisoners in prayer,
And in the end was killed by lethal injection.

But for the rest of life Franciszek Gajowniczek talked of the man who had died for him
That is the sense that Mary
This is the man who is going to die, somehow for me

And I will fill the house
I will give of my very best.

And I want us to think today of the Christ who died for me
Who saves us
Who deserves our very best

I want you to think today of that radical acceptance he has given you
Which changes you
He is the passover lamb

I want you to think of him holding your life
Hearing the deepest of prayers

And I want to think of the kind of life of kindness that he now calls you into.
The life of service to others
In memory of the one who gave everything for you,

AMEN