

Lent 5 – built on devotion

The monastery in Yorkshire where I trained for the priesthood, had a longstanding tradition where they recalled the whole community back from their Easter academic break to spend the week together devoting ourselves to the Holy Week cycle of prayer, worship and adoration. In my second year, however, the then new College Principal decided to change what happened. Instead of continuing this custom, he decided that we should all be sent out into separate parishes to gain some 'experience'. It was an ill thought through plan based on very questionable assumptions, and unsurprisingly, it was a complete disaster. Firstly, one week was never going to be enough to gain the kind of experience he envisaged. In a week one couldn't even learn people's names, let alone get an insight into their culture and practices. Second it forced us to miss an opportunity for the shared experience of devoting ourselves together on the most important time in the Christian year. In spite of our differences (and, believe me, just like any community we had many differences), these kind of shared experiences were invaluable in binding us together around our joint belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Our faith was the thing that bound us together, in fact it was the reason we were there in the first place and being together in devotion at the most significant times of the Christian year was important for both enriching that faith and influencing what underpinned our interaction as a community for the rest of the year. Denying us this opportunity, we were left finding other things to focus upon, and I fear these were far less positive – mainly our common mistrust of the new Principal (which we would waste no time discussing over a couple of gins). Normally our devotion stopped us from sliding into cynicism, without it, the cynicism descended apace.

In our Gospel reading today, Mary shows us what can happen to an individual when they enter into and attend to a community's full-blown devotion. Judas shows us what happens when an individual descends into brooding cynicism.

Martha, Mary's sister, as ever, is busy actively scurrying around instead of paying attention to her Lord. Maybe she cannot bear to sit and spend time with him, maybe she has too much pain and refuses to allow Jesus to reach in and heal it. Either way, Martha thinks she is being faithful by being busy, nothing could be further from the truth.

Nonetheless, whilst Martha scurries around like a panicky little field mouse, all the rest sit at table with Jesus, basking in his presence and soaking up his wisdom. The disciples together with Mary's brother, Lazarus, having only been raised from the dead a short while before, are also there. The smells of the city are entering in through the window. Then Mary suddenly anoints Jesus' feet with costly perfume. The stench of the City and the grime of the gutter is suddenly transformed into the voluptuous smell of sweet perfume. The beautiful smell of this liquid incense slowly fills the house. This is so over the top. But then that is the point. It is not every day that your brother is raised from the dead, neither is it every day that you sit in the presence of God's own son.

But whenever people worship God with everything they have, there is always someone cynically muttering in the background that ointment costs money! We watch in horror at the disintegration of Judas. At this moment of absolute devotion, Judas wades in to shatter the sanctity and to complain about the financial cost. In Chapter 13 of John's Gospel we are told that the devil enters into Judas at the Last Supper, here we see the beginning of the actions which open the door towards such destruction within Judas's soul. At first we assume that it is

just his devotion that has evaporated, then his loyalty, then his honesty, then his respect of the others in the community, then finally his respect for himself. Later, we find that he loses the ability to choose good over evil altogether. But here in Lazarus's house the seeds begin to be sown.

Judas continues on to live a life that revolves around himself, which in the end deconstructs. Judas symbolises those who only care for themselves and the way is self-destruction. Mary stands for the way of self-giving. Both are costly, but in very different ways. Mary's way leads to the unsettling Fire of the Spirit, Judas' leads to the unquenchable fire of hell.

As Mary shows, a life lived in the self-giving spirit of Christ, begins with faith and devotion.

Our New testament reading today from St Paul to the Philippians, gives us a little more of an insight. St Paul begins by boasting about his many achievements, his righteousness and all he has done. But, as he points out, all of these are worthless outside of the love of Christ. For St Paul, all the good deeds in the world are baseless if they are not done in the faith and devotion of Christ who is the giver of all good things. This requires commitment to the Christian community, to attend to our faith, to spend time in devotion to Jesus, listening, basking, offering sweet fragrance.

When a Christian community comes together in faith to devote themselves in prayer and adoration to Jesus, so they become united through something far less fickle than a mere friendship group or worldly allegiance. We must not other-think why our devotion takes the form it does. But by simply devoting time together in prayer to God; spending time together basking in Christ's presence, so our faith grows and Christ's goodness becomes central to our deeds and

aspirations. Just like Mary, it can seem costly as the Spirit begins questioning our priorities, but faith does not grow unless we grasp it!

As today's Gospel outlines to us in the characters of Judas and Mary, we either follow the way of devotion which leads to eternal life in the Spirit, or we fall into the way of cynicism which leads to destruction. And the way of cynicism is so subtle. Just like Judas, it starts with a disinterest in devotion, then a lack of loyalty to Jesus and his community, then dishonesty first with others and then ourselves. Before we know it we are standing in the shoes of Judas selling an innocent person for 30 pieces of silver.

This Holy Week and Easter, we are afforded the opportunity to come together in prayer and devotion, as we walk together the journey of Jerusalem to Calvary. When we walk the entire journey with him can we receive Christ's full spiritual blessings come Easter Day. So whatever your diary commitments over Holy Week, I would encourage you to make the space, reprioritise, make the time. Only our devotion can lead us to deeper faith and eternal life in the Spirit. This holy season, join Mary, Lazarus and Christ's disciples around the table whilst Jesus fills our hearts with the eternal promises of God.

Amen

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