Fifth Sunday of Lent

17th March 2013

Isaiah 43: 16-21, Psalm 126, Philippians 3:3-14, John 12:1-8

Reading today's gospel it's easy to think that we're listening to one of the warm up stories of the pre-Easter Jesus, getting us ready for the main event of the coming Easter narrative. However, the readings and the gospel have a richer purpose, they give us an opportunity to see ourselves; an opportunity to reflect on where we are and on what opportunities we have before us.

Right in the centre of today's gospel we find Judas Iscariot, and if we were in pantomime, we would boo as he makes his entrance. However, Judas asks a question that we've most likely all asked at some point. I would imagine that more than half those watching the selection of the new pope either uttered or thought about the amount of money on display throughout the whole process. 115 cardinals (and more) flying to Rome, then there is the gold, the vestments and the treasures of the Vatican; why don't they sell some of it and give the money to the poor? It is one of the classic protests of the protestants.

Perhaps we all have a Judas attitude. We can look at the Vatican or at Peppermint Grove or somewhere and see that "they" could give more to the poor. Then comes the sobering reminder that the poor can look at us, and look at me, with exactly the same question.

The response to the question takes us beyond a simplistic evaluation of economics and speaks of Mary's orientation. She is looking ahead, she is giving richly to the future and she is giving not to herself, but is placing her wealth at the very feet of Christ. Mary illustrates for us an orientation that has an orientation of service to the body of Christ.

In this simple narrative, using the characters of Judas and Mary we are given an illustration of our own true orientation. This is not another hearing of a Jesus story from Sunday-School, it is a gift to us that offers us a direction. And when we engage the readings looking for a direction they have even more to offer us.

When we acknowledge where we are, then we also open ourselves to seeking where to from here. And we are in the wilderness of Lent, which is very similar in many respects to the wilderness of life. Unsure, uncertain, afraid of death only slightly more than we are afraid of life. The wilderness of Lent is the place of "flesh", as Paul would call it; a place for confronting the self-interest and self-centeredness that keeps us from giving ourselves as Christ gave himself. And the readings are like a sort of compass for us to find our way out of Lent and into the mystery of Easter.

We began this morning with a reading from Isaiah, and "Thus says the Lord" heralds for us a divine direction. [19] *I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?* Don't be troubled if the answer is no; what we can all take from

this prophetic utterance is an appreciation of the Divine activity. God did not create the world in the sense we learnt at Sunday-School, rather in each and every moment God is "*[I am] about to do a new thing"*.

The Divine activity is the very life of creation, the very act of creativity in every moment. When we seek to maintain the status quo, or, more bluntly, do nothing that contributes to creation, we turn away from the activity of God into our own small world of self-preservation; we remain in the wilderness of Lent. Isaiah calls us to perceive (observe, notice, recognise) that which is moving into newness, perceive the activity of creation.

Paul underlines the same process, or direction, in the second reading. In the first three verses Paul documents his being "in the flesh", he outlines his self-interested and self-centred identity. Here we find that version of Paul that was to be found in his wilderness of Lent. Then in verse 10 we have the truest desire of Paul; *"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection….. by becoming like him in his death";* Paul desires to live in Christ, to be alive in the power of resurrection and to give of himself as Christ gave of himself. And then finally, we have the orientation of Paul in verses 13 & 14; *"this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."*

It is the same orientation that we found when we encountered Mary in the gospel,; and it is the orientation we must also encounter of we are to come out of the wilderness and into the mystery of Easter, what Paul calls the "*power of [his] resurrection*".

Now let's look again at the gospel, but this time let's look beyond the person of Judas. The action of the gospel takes place in the *"the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead."* That's not a throwaway line, but a reality that changes the whole shape of Easter. Part of our tradition, and the early teaching we received about Easter was that its central importance was that Jesus was raised from the dead. And Jesus conquered death, so that we to can look forward to resurrection.

In the Nicene Creed we confirm a belief in both of these premises;
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures;
In one holy catholic and apostolic Church; we acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; we look for the ***resurrection of the dead****, and the life of the world to come. Amen.*

Let's just rewind the opening paragraph of the sermon;
"*Reading today's gospel it's easy to think that we're listening to one of the warm up stories of the pre-Easter Jesus, getting us ready for the main event of the coming Easter narrative. However the readings and the gospel have a richer purpose, they give us an opportunity to see ourselves; an opportunity to reflect on where we are and on what opportunities we have before us.*"

Perhaps the resurrection of Jesus is not the big-event we've been led to believe, because today we are reminded that Lazarus was raised from the dead (before Easter).

Paul is seeking the “power of resurrection” in his life orientation; he perceives a reality that was revealed through Christ. So in the coming weeks we could join the “Church” in celebrating the resurrection of Jesus at Easter, or we can prepare, with an expectation that resurrection is not a limited experience and seek to celebrate the “new thing” that is yet to be realised in ourselves.

Peter Humphris