

Lent 5 – Wesley Uniting – 17th March 2013

Theme: “Extravagant Generosity”

Reading: John 12:1-8 ‘Jesus anointed at Bethany’

Introduction

I’d like you to take a few moments and think about generosity given freely with no thought of repayment. Have you experienced such generosity, been the recipient of it? How did it feel? I am not simply talking about money, but maybe some-one’s time given to you or even a friendship with ‘no strings attached, so to speak’.

For me it happened in theological college, coming up this year to 39 years ago. It is something that has stuck with me all through my ministry life. I was about to get married and didn’t have ‘two pennies to rub together’ to use an image of bygone days. I came back to my study at the theological college and there was an envelope on my desk. All it said on the outside was ‘Have a great honeymoon’ and inside were some \$100 bills. I was overwhelmed as I hadn’t even seen one of these new notes that had only just been printed for the Australian economy. It certainly meant we had a wonderful honeymoon visiting a far off land, Kangaroo Island, off the South Australian coast!!

Extravagant generosity has been the theme of our readings over these past few weeks and continues today. Last week with the Loving Father or the Prodigal Son parable in Luke’s Gospel we saw the gracious, loving father wonderfully receiving his younger wayward son back into the family. An image of God’s relationship and desire for us to be forgiven and part of the God’s family. Today we have a ‘real life’ occurrence where Jesus is bestowed with an amazing gift which he recognizes but at least one disciple questions that gift of love. Let us look at the passage.

John 12:1-8

Jesus arrives at Bethany, a village on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives, about 3 kilometres from Jerusalem, which is to be his final destination of his journey. He comes to have dinner with Lazarus, who he had earlier raised from the dead and his sisters Martha and Mary. The dinner was in honour of Jesus and Martha served.

Then the unexpected happened – I love it with Jesus, there is often the unexpected happening, usually of his making – but not this time. It is Mary who upstages Jesus. She does three things:

Firstly, she takes about pint or in weight, the best part of a kilogram of pure nard, a fragrant oil, from the nard plant, which originated in India. This was incredibly expensive.

Secondly, she pours it all over Jesus’ feet, an act of a servant washing his feet, which Jesus will do for his disciples in the near future.

Thirdly, she wipes his feet with her hair, again a most curious thing to do. No respectable woman would unbind her hair in public let alone apparently demean herself with such an act as this.

I love the outcome of her action recorded in John 12:3c

“And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.”

I think this has a double meaning. It was not only the smell of the perfume that permeated that place, it was the love action of Mary that also filled the house.

The unexpected and profound love, returned to Jesus by the actions of Mary – absolutely wonderful and stunning.

Suddenly this amazing love is wiped away in in the words of Judas Iscariot in vs 5. “Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year’s wages.”

The harsh reality of practicality, wanting to take away from the gift and demean both the giver and the receiver rather than celebrating in the joy of the extravagant gift. John of course also goes on to put this in the context that Judas is a thief and cared little about the poor and was more interested in trying to look out for himself and 'line his own pockets' so the speak.

The third section of this brief passage is Jesus' defence of Mary against Judas. Very rarely in his ministry is Jesus so direct. Verse 7 begins with the straightforward words – "Leave her alone." Here Jesus is making a defence of all whose extravagant generosity and use of gifts are stifled by those who, for whatever reasons, feel they have to put others down when they step forward exercising their God given talents. How sad!! Jesus then makes a dual comment about his impending death. Hence this is a 'lead in' to the passion narrative that follows in John's Gospel.

In amongst it is the saying: "You will always have the poor among you but you will not always have me." Jesus is not condoning the rejection or forgetting of the poor but is simply saying that they will be a continuing group to care for but I won't always be with you. Implied in this is that what Mary has done is indeed a beautiful thing.

Reflection on the passage for me. (hopefully this helps you as well)

As I reflected on the passage it made me both incredibly happy as well as quite sad because of the differing attitudes of the main characters – Mary and Judas.

Mary exercised a joyous freedom, an extravagance born out of a love for Jesus. She didn't worry about the social norms of her day and did what her heart called her to do. The love flowed from her in her act of extravagant generosity.

Judas on the other hand 'killed that love' by demeaning it in terms of money or worldliness and by trying to put boundaries around the appropriateness or otherwise of the action, born out of love, by Mary.

As we are in the season of Lent it made me think of what are we called to do in this season where so often people suggest we should give up this or that to show that we are being penitent as we approach Easter.

I believe this reading teaches us the opposite! We are called to do random acts of extravagant generosity – do the unexpected and break some of the customs that have built up with this season. I like the thought of random acts of kindness in this season of Lent.

The other thing that struck me was the need not to be a 'kill joy' for those who seek change, new ideas, new directions and have a vision for what 'could be' in the life of the congregation, the parish and the wider church. We are called to be encouragers, in the name of Christ, not to squash individuals or groups that have enthusiasm and hope for the future. This is especially true for us as we enter the period reflecting on 'The Life and Witness Review' of our parish as we prepare ourselves for focussing on calling a new ministry agent for next year.

Let us pray

Loving God, giver of the most expensive gift of all, help us to learn from you. May we who are so adept at catering to our own wants, make ourselves more vulnerable to the needs of others. Let us live unselfishly and more sensitively, that we may spread love's fragrance where-ever the odour of cynicism and despair hangs in the air. May we do random acts of kindness and generosity, for no other reason than to bring praise to Jesus, our Lord and our Saviour. Amen.