



So here we are, on another Passion Sunday, perhaps with our thoughts turning from a consideration of our own spiritual life through the earlier weeks of Lent towards the cross and passion of our Lord and, in particular, to what they have to say to us this year. I stress ‘this year’ because the world seems strangely different. The last two Passion Sundays have been dominated by the plague and its associated lockdowns and restrictions, and perhaps that experience has informed the way we look at what Passiontide means, but this year, whilst we are not wholly done with the plague, the terrible events in Ukraine are influencing the way we see the world, and we set our Lord’s Passion in that context.

We can think of today’s Gospel reading in all sorts of different ways. We might dwell on the fact that the action takes place at Bethany, at the home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus, a place where we know Jesus found a refuge and note that his friends were giving a dinner for him. Or we might consider that here again it is Martha busy with the serving, whilst Mary sits again at Jesus’ feet. We could reflect, as John prompts us to do, on the miracle Jesus performed in Bethany in bringing Lazarus out of his tomb, and see if that holds any comfort for us as Passiontide draws on to its grisly conclusion. We might compare this occasion of the anointing of Jesus’ feet with nard and the wiping with a woman’s hair with the other Gospel records of similar events. We might dwell on the perfidy of Judas, and consider how John paints his character in unflattering terms here, preparing us for the much worse betrayal that is to come.

Alternatively we might just dwell for a few moments on the extravagant grace that the act of anointing represents.



The nard, or spikenard, came from the roots of the *Nardostachys jatamansi*



plant, of the Valerian family, which is found growing in the Himalayas. The roots were crushed and distilled to produce a heavy-scented aromatic amber-coloured essential oil, thick in consistency. It was highly prized in the ancient world, both as an unction and for medicinal purposes, which explains why it was traded far from its place of production, which in turn led to its



high value.

A denarius was the daily wage of a labourer, so applying the current British minimum hourly wage rate (£9.50) to an eight hour day, Judas' estimate of 300 denarii gives us the value of the nard in today's money as about £23,000. Although we don't know much about the financial circumstances of the family of Lazarus, Martha and Mary, we can be sure that this pure nard (not extended by mixing with less expensive oils) was a prized possession in the household and so Mary's gesture was highly significant for that reason alone. But, if we think of the gifts brought by the wise men at Jesus' birth, the gold, frankincense and myrrh, we recollect that he was no stranger to



expensive gifts.

Perhaps of even more significance is Mary falling at Jesus' feet, to anoint them and all in front of the dinner party – such an unseemly display – and then going on to wipe his feet with her hair - what abandonment - what passion!

So I say that this was an act of the most extravagant grace, a gift freely offered without obligation – and Jesus sees it and accepts it as that, and links it for all time with the day of his burial.

The other week, at the Cathedral *Living in Love & Faith* course, we were invited to consider what it means being made 'in the image of God', and the small group of which I was part, thought that it involved our natures having something of the divine in them. We recognised that all sorts of things get in the way of us living our lives in godly ways, but we nevertheless could discern the imprint of God in us – that we are capable of performing acts of grace, derived from the fact that God is the very source of grace. I was thinking about that when listening to a BBC Radio 4 programme discussing some of the findings of the 'Kindness Survey' that was carried out last year. The results have now been analysed and they are beginning to draw some conclusions. One programme considered whether altruism actually exists, or whether all human behaviour for apparent good is motivated by some inner motive of self-satisfaction. From what I could gather, they were not wholly sure of the answer to that one! In another programme in the series they were addressing the question of whether we were only kind towards 'people like us', and the conclusion there was that people generally are kinder to people with whom they identify, but that we can find ourselves identifying with a wider range of people if we seek to see the things in the other person that we have in common, rather than emphasising the differences. They used the example of the refugees fleeing from the war in Ukraine at the moment, and the response of people of other nations seeking to give them succour. Is the response to this situation kinder than to the situation with Afghani or Syrian refugees? If so, is it because we concentrate on differences in skin colour, or religion, rather than on our common humanity, our desire to help rescue children, or aid desperate parents seeking safety for their families. I occurred to me that I had always thought of the Ukraine and Belarus (and Russia for that matter) as themselves being very 'other' until I encountered some of them in the visits of the Chernobyl Children to this country over a number of summers.

I began by saying that the situation in Ukraine at the moment might influence how we see our Lord's passion, just as the effects of Covid-19 might have influenced how we approached Passiontide in the past two years. In all these tumultuous times we see the very worst and the very best of human behaviour. In war we can see terrible violence and inhumanity, but we can also see acts of grace in

examples of self-less heroism. In the height of the plague time we saw plenty of examples of callous heedlessness, and were forced to confront all the many places in society where people were left exposed to severe hardship and suffering because of long-standing inequalities and unfairnesses, but we also saw much of devotion to duty, of love being expended on strangers without counting the cost, all acts of grace.

These acts of grace, for Christians, find their source in the heart of God, in whose image we are made. How do we know that this is what the nature of God is, rather than being a brutal autocrat or a disinterested watchmaker on a very grand scale? Because he gave of himself, his own Son, to be born on earth and live among us and then to give himself up to death in order to bring us back to himself, and then to rise again and ascend back to his father, opening for us the door to eternal life.



These, I suggest, are the things on which to ponder this Passiontide. Let us lay at the foot of Christ's cross all the ills of the world, all the agonies and anxieties of our own hearts and find renewed strength in our risen and ascended Lord to live our lives as his Easter people.



Clive Lemmon