

St. Ninian's Parish Church

Sunday 7th April 2019

John 12: 1 – 8

It wasn't his to give. And how typical is that. Judas, who plays one of the main parts, one of the central roles, in the drama of Jesus' passion and crucifixion, Judas the betrayer, is not so different from us. Everyone finds it easy to spend other people's money. That is what Judas is doing here in the passage we read from the Gospel this morning.

*Mary brought a pound of very costly perfume, pure oil of nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus... At this, Judas Iscariot, a disciple of his – the one who was to betray him – said, 'Why was this perfume not sold for thirty pounds and given to the poor?'*¹

It was Mary's perfume, pure oil of nard, that she had probably bought to anoint the body of her brother, Lazarus, following his death. It turned out that she no longer needed it for that, so instead she used it to anoint Jesus, unwittingly ahead of his death.

Judas though, like us all at times, was quick to judge. After all, it was easy for Judas to judge Mary, the perfume could have been sold, as he said, and the money given to the poor. We are all like that sometimes, when we see an easy opportunity to judge other people's actions. When it is easy to judge others, then we tend to be quick to judge.

But, Judas, like many people, was too quick to judge. In judging Mary, he forgot that it wasn't his perfume to sell. And, what's more, in so far as Mary was responding to this moment in Jesus' life by anointing Jesus' feet just days before his death - who knows what he must have been feeling at that moment - Jesus' feelings weren't Judas' to disregard either.

It is an easy thing to say, 'Sell it, give the money to the poor, who cares about Jesus,' if the money isn't yours, you are not the one who is going to die, and you are not the poor. How did Judas know that the poor would have preferred the money? Maybe they, like Mary, would have preferred to see Jesus anointed than receive the cash. But, who knows, maybe he did ask them – we are not told.

Today, we would call Judas' behaviour not just rude, but more than that, it is what we call today, virtue signalling. Virtue signalling is when you say something, not because you intend to do it, but just to signal to others one of your virtues. Judas is trying to make a point about his own virtue at no cost to him, himself, but at a great cost to others; he won't have to pay the price, he won't have to put aside his experience of being anointed by precious perfume.

No wonder Jesus was so irritated, 'Leave her alone,' he said to Judas, 'you'll always have the poor among you, you'll not always have me.' And, as much as Judas was right, that the money could have been given to the poor, so was Jesus. Once given, it would be gone, and poverty would still be there. That's because – as Jesus knew - money alone does not cure poverty. What cures poverty is as much to do with our attitudes towards other people as it is to do with how much money we give them; it is as much about the relationship society has to those who are poor, expressed through, for example, the opportunities, education, and housing people can access, as it is about how much cash is available to be handed out.

That is what is being traded here. It isn't perfume that Judas is proposing to sell, it is relationships. To help the poor, Judas is not just selling someone else's possession - perfume that didn't belong to him - he's also selling Mary's love and the quality of Jesus' last days on earth, and these things don't belong to him either.

¹ John 12: 3 - 4

As soon as we start doing that, as soon as you start putting a price on other people's feelings, or on things that rightfully belong to others; or on other people's lives, all in the cause of your own virtue, then you are going to find that your own morality is going to start unravelling very quickly. The road is very straight and very short that leads from selling someone else's possessions, to selling someone else's feelings, to selling the quality of someone else's life, to selling that very life itself for whatever will enhance your good opinion of yourself, or your reputation, or your status, or your power, or your place in society, or your project, or your ideology, or your policy proposal.

That journey can be so short and the road so straight that in Judas' case the nard would have fetched a lot more money on the open market when he proposed to sell it than he got for Jesus' entire life only a few days later.

It is just too easy and too convenient to value too cheaply what is not ours, what we don't have the right to place a value on: other people's possessions; other people's feelings; the quality of other people's lives; their very lives themselves. Watch out for that because it is easy to become a Judas: it is cheap and easy to betray other people: to sell their possessions; their feelings; their lives in the cause of a virtuous project, which is all about you, but costs you nothing. When you do that, when you persuade people to buy your vision of virtue (Brexit perhaps) at no cost to yourself, but at great cost to those people your selling it too, things start to unravel and go wrong very quickly.

That calculation – the calculation of value – changes when it comes to our own possessions, our own feelings, our own lives. When a rich man went to Jesus asking what the value was of God's Kingdom - we find this in the other three Gospels - Jesus told him that he would inherit eternal life if he kept the commandments. When the rich, young man said that he already did that, and asked what more should he do, Jesus told him to sell all his possessions and give them to the poor.

Judas may have been prepared to sell Jesus cheaply, but when Jesus was asked by the rich, young man to put a value on his life and his kingdom, it's no surprise to find that Jesus put a limitless value on it. After all, what price would you put on your life?

Questions of value, like this, dogged Jesus all his life; how much is following Jesus worth? Some, like Judas valued it so cheaply that they didn't last long on the journey. Others, like the rich, young man, weren't prepared to value it at all, so didn't even begin the journey.

We've had other examples of this during Lent. On the first Sunday of Lent we heard, as Jesus wandered in the wilderness, that the devil tried to tempt Jesus into putting a value on his Kingdom. The devil offered him all the kingdoms of the world – considerably more than the rich man offered – but Jesus wasn't taking that deal either.

In the second week of Lent we read – tangentially - about the group of women who were following Jesus and paying all his bills, probably with Herod's money. And, of course, last week, the Prodigal Son sold his relationship with his father for a lot of money, but not enough that it wouldn't soon be used up. The Prodigal Son realised the error of his ways – his relationship with his father turned out to be worth far more than the money he spent. He was lucky that, in contrast, his father put a seemingly limitless value on their relationship, and the Prodigal Son was able to return to the family home.

In the Gospel of Matthew it says,

The Kingdom of heaven is like treasure lying buried in a field. The man who found it, buried it again; and for sheer joy went and sold everything he had, and bought that field.

When he found that treasure that man buried it again, because you can't steal the Kingdom of Heaven – you cannot take what is not yours, Judas. Instead, the man sold all he had, and he bought the field. If you want it, you have to put a value on it. What is it worth to you, not what is it worth to other people - what is it worth to you? That man with the field didn't go around asking other people what faith in God and trust in Jesus was worth. If you ask other people to value your faith, believe me they will sell it cheap. What is it worth to you?

That is the question before us during this season of Lent, how much is faith worth to you? The question is being asked in two ways. If you are a member of the church, you will have received a leaflet from the St. Ninian's Stewardship Team asking you to review your contribution to the work of the church. There is no suggestion of how much you should give; give what you can. The letter sets out the breadth and the depth of relationships that the church supports, locally, nationally and internationally, and of course spiritually. It is your money, so you decide.

Secondly, these five weeks of Lent have taken us along a journey that hasn't always been comfortable or easy, and that has asked searching questions about how we live our lives. But, those five weeks are as nothing compared to the next two. During the next two weeks we will be encountering deep cruel suffering, and a remarkable, extraordinary, miraculous event.

They all fled during those two week, Jesus disciples did. In Luke's Gospel, by the time he is crucified there are no disciples left. Other gospel accounts put the women who followed Jesus at the foot of the cross, and then they are found at the empty tomb while the disciples are cowering in a closed-up upper room. Those women were the same women who funded Jesus' work in Galilee, who valued it so highly they were prepared to pay his bills. But, as with Mary and her perfume, it was never about the money really, it was always about a relationship of devotion and commitment.

Similarly, for us, it's not about the money really, it is about a devoted, committed relationship to God through Jesus Christ, lived out in this world amongst these people, the church, Christ's living body faith and love. How much is this worth – to you?