

Christ Church, Bath

Holy Eucharist  
Passion Sunday 3 April 2022  
10.00am

St John 12.1-8

“Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor?” asks Judas.

St John tells us that he said this because he was a thief, stealing from the common purse. His claim that the money could be put to better use was no more than cover for his own criminality. It's a pattern we see all around us. Isn't President Putin trying to justify his 'special military operations' in Ukraine by claiming he's clearing out the Nazis, that he's doing no more than restoring a breakaway province to its historic place within the Russian Federation?

But before we rush to condemn, let's pause for a moment. We would be wise to listen to the still small voice whispering biblical texts such as “Let anyone among you who is without sin be a first to throw a stone”? Or “how can you say to your neighbour, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye’, while the log is in your own eye?”

One of St John's themes in his Gospel is how the coming of Christ shows up the sin of the world. It's about how “the Light shines in the darkness,

and the darkness did not overcome it.” In the next couple of weeks, as we move through Paschionide to the events of Holy Week and Good Friday, we are going to see darkness doing its best to quench the light, and coming within an ace of achieving it.

I don't know about you, but since the invasion of Ukraine over a month ago I've not wanted to watch the news. It's not just that what we are shown (and the BBC is being careful not to show us the worst) is so awful that I want to turn away. It's getting me down; and judging by the news reports I am far from alone.

Passion Sunday however is a reminder that turning aside is not the Christian way. If we are going to follow the Way of the Cross, if we're going to (as both the hymn and the Saviour says) 'Take up our Cross' the liturgies and rituals of the next two weeks will, should, feel very uncomfortable.

For it's not just the wounds of Christ that are going to confront us. It's going to be our own sins too. That's what Mary of Bethany's extravagant gesture was doing to Judas, showing up his hypo-

crisis and exposing the criminality that lies behind it.

Moreover, as we meditate on the sufferings of Christ, on the sufferings that he will undergo ending in his death and burial, we're going to see Christ continuing to suffer today: in the victims of war in Ukraine and elsewhere.

Or two years on from George Floyd's death, have black people been released from the violence of discrimination? And what about the suffering of those mothers and babies laid bare in the Shrewsbury and Telford maternity scandal?

I could go on. For what these and other scandals have in common are the attempts to justify or at least explain away wrongdoing and the responsibility of the perpetrators. Dictators and kleptocrats always claim to be upholding law and order (like Judas claims to be upholding almsgiving). Racists, either explicitly or implicitly, come up with specious theories about their own superiority. Public servants shift the blame onto colleagues, onto everyone but themselves.

What they are all trying to do is to justify their privilege. The dictator guards his power – and it usually is a ‘he’, though it doesn’t have to be. Racists keep others ‘in their place’ because deep down they fear that others, more competent, might displace them. All want to go on enjoying their privileges.

But what about us? Is it always other people? Most of us worshipping in this church are among the most privileged human beings alive on this planet. Compared to the majority of the world’s population we’re living extremely well; in peace, with security, not just in the military sense, but security of income, and housing, and healthcare.

How much of our security and prosperity might be built on the suffering of others? Is our cheap food gathered on the backs of underpaid labour? What about our clothes? What about the services from which we benefit? How fair are the systems by which we are governed? How just?

Here at Christ Church we’ve been wrestling with the legacy of slavery, for notwithstanding the role played in the building of this church by William

Wilberforce, some of the donations were made with slave money, and the economy of Bath, let alone Great Britain, was growing rich on it.

These are uncomfortable questions. We shy away from them. Darkness doesn't like the shining rays of light. But once we let Christ into our lives there is no getting away from them, not unless we follow the example of the traitor-disciple Judas.

For it's not just Judas who has tried to trash the reputation of Mary of Bethany. Although there is no evidence for making this identification, much Christian tradition has identified her with Mary Magdalen, and trashed her reputation too – saying that she was a prostitute and a fallen woman. What did they call those wretched mother-and-baby homes in Ireland? “Magdalen laundries.”

But none of this is of Christ. He accepted Mary's gift for what it was and is: an act of love. If there were sins in her past, he forgives them. And in his reply to Judas, he throws down another challenge to us as we read this gospel at the start of Passiontide.

For his answer to Judas begs a question. Would we always have the poor with us, if we lived our lives like Christ lived his? Or could we not share what we have, as those first Christians did in Jerusalem in the months immediately after the Resurrection, when they shared all their resources in common?

And there's another, perhaps even more frightening question that Christ's answer to Judas begs. Christ tells Judas that he will not always have Christ with him. And indeed Judas doesn't, if this is the meaning of his suicide.

But the question for us is, Will we?