

Sermon 7 April 2019

Isaiah 43:16-21 and John 12:1-8

Are the old ways, the tried and tested ways, the best way to do things?

On Friday evening Sarah Thorne and her family took me with them to see the output of the work done by young people attending the Creative Youth Network. There was performance, music, animation, printmaking and fashion, all under the banner of 'Our Voice'. The young people had explored the theme of 'Our Voice' and the contributions ranged from a response to climate change in print making, through respect and love in fashion, to cyber bullying in animation and 'no one listens to us' in performance.

They all led me to ponder whether the old ways are the best ways.

Today's young people are experiencing a childhood and adolescence that looks different from mine. Yes, there was bullying, yes, at times we were squashed by our teachers, expected to conform. But I wonder if the bullying was as subtle, as all pervasive as it is today. And I think my teachers had more space to help us learn who we were growing up to be. Do the ways that I used to charter my way through youth and adolescence work today? Indeed, do the ways I chartered my way through my 20s, 30s and 40s work today? Do the ways I learned to worship God still work today?

By the time we get into the later chapters of Isaiah, the message of the prophet has changed from one of judgment against wickedness and corruption to one of comfort. God's people are in exile in Babylon, they are a people whose whole world is shattered. Isaiah 43 starts with the wonderful words, 'Fear not, for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine'.

Verses 16 and 17 recall the exodus, the escape from Egypt through the Red Sea. God's people have remembered the exodus as part of God's great promise to protect them. The recitation of their history with God and, in particular, the journey from Egypt to the promised land, has been part of their collective memory and worship.

Verse 18 however warns them that they should not remember the former things, should not consider the things of old, for God is about to do a new thing.

Putting these three verses together suggests that God is promising that the exiles will leave Babylon and warns them not to live in the past.

Their journey home to the promised land will be a hard way, a new wilderness. This time God will make water to flow in the desert.

Fear turns us in on ourselves. We can look back at the past, to times when we have been rescued, and we can retreat into it. Or we can use the past as a springboard to launch ourselves into the future, even if that might seem a wild and dark place to go. God is promising here to his people in exile that as the wilderness had been conquered before, so they will have new strength and new ways to conquer this new wilderness again.

So, God is not limited to acting in the old familiar ways. In order to accomplish ways of salvation God sets out to be of contemporary relevance to our lives, sitting with us in our times of darkness and wilderness and fear, and showing us new ways through, if only we look for them with him. And we do so, not just in order to find our way home but also, having found a way through, that we will sing God's praise.

That is what I would like to tell our young people looking for ways through their own wilderness, using their fear to launch themselves into the future, to find their voice, to find their way to defeat bullies, to find adults

who will listen to them with respect and who will work with them to find solutions to the problems that the adults won't have to live with.

And our gospel reading highlights one of the wilderness experiences of our time, of every time. Judas responds to Mary's extravagant gesture by grumbling about the value of the gift she has bestowed on Jesus. Perfume, which if sold, could have raised money which could have fed 5,000 people.

I often hear people grumbling about the decision of church leaders in Uganda to build churches rather than feed the poor, I've thought it myself. But of course, churches will be the places where people are fed with the bread of faith, with the word of God. And they are also a sign that God is active. And we too have benefitted from extravagant gifts which have enhanced our use of our worship space, thinking of the flexible way that the Lady Chapel can be used, making it accessible to everyone. Is that a gift of nard put to good use?

I love the fact that the Sister of the Church have asked for Easter Eggs to be given this year, so the children who receive them will get a frivolous gift, and yet one perhaps that might encourage questions about, what is Easter.

Mary loves, honours, worships the person of Jesus. She has previously sat at his feet to receive his teaching. She has wept with him when he arrived too late to save her brother Lazarus from death. Together with her sister Martha she saw her brother walk out from the tomb where he had been buried. And now she sits at Jesus' feet again, to pour perfume over them, to anoint him as if at his own burial. Scandalously, she lets down her hair in the presence of men who are not her family, and she wipes his feet with her hair.

Should she have sold the nard?

Contemporary liberation theologians and scholars believe that what is really happening here is Jesus is referring back to Deuteronomy 15:11, which reads "Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, Open your hand to the poor and needy in your land." In putting this text together with Jesus' prediction of his death and burial, the writer is reminding the disciples and us to be prepared to be of service and care for the poor--for that's where Jesus will be--among the poor.

Perhaps this is also part of what Mary understands that the others do not; that in his extravagant love for everyone, Jesus is found not just among the disciples, or a family in Bethany, but also among the stranger, the widowed, the orphaned, the ill, and the poor. And as those who have been called to continue in the mission and ministry of Jesus, there too we should be.

What's your alabaster jar, the thing that is precious to you, something you have saved for the day it will be needed? Would breaking open your jar be an extravagant gesture of love for Jesus? Would it, could it, should it be something that will honour Jesus, be part of our worship of Jesus? Will it be something that might break through the wilderness experience of our young people, of the poor in spirit, of the poverty stricken or of those who find comfort in the old ways but in staying there deny themselves the experience of the new water that God wants us to find in our deserts.

Amen

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