

Sermon for Lent 5, 17 March 2013, St James, Cambridge The Revd. Geoffrey Howard

Lectionary Readings:

Isaiah 43.16-21

Psalm 126

Philippians 3.4b-14

John 12.1-8

At the turn of the 20th century Nonconformity was a powerful force in British society and Joseph Parker of the City Temple in London was one of its most influential ministers. He was an autocratic man who had a high sense of his calling; he once said that if God had called you to be a preacher you should not stoop to be a king – and he meant it. He was also self-opinionated and quarrelsome. Not infrequently after a regular row with one or another of his church officials he would return home on a Sunday evening and command his long-suffering wife to bring him pen and ink for him to write his letter of resignation. She would invariably return with a cup of tea and, once again, the letter would be deferred.

I do not know Mrs Parker's Christian name, but I would not be too surprised if it turned out to be Martha. The Martha of the New Testament strikes me as the kind of woman who if the world was threatening to come to an end and Armageddon was lurking around the next corner would turn up with a cup of tea to calm the belligerents. Mrs Parker and Martha are among that noble band of women - the bakers of bread, slicers of cake, makers of soup and brewers of tea - who when things are falling apart help to hold them together. They belong to the practical, let's call it the Salvation Army end of the Church.

Mary is more difficult to place. There is a lavishness about Mary that distinguishes her from her down-to-earth sister. She never doled out her gifts in teaspoonsful, she gave in bucketsful. There is something prodigal, immoderate in her giving. You can imagine her at the extravagant, baroque end of the Church. Probably her most costly possession was that pound of nard, very precious, which she poured over Jesus' feet. But her's is not the extravagance of ostentation, of display for display's sake, it is the extravagance of love.

When I survey the wondrous Cross is a hymn which I love and which never fails to move me. But there are some lines I find difficult to sing:

Were the whole realm of nature mine that were an offering far too small; and,

All the vain things that charm me most, I sacrifice them to His blood.

I wonder, I wonder. Can I really sing those words with sincerity? Another hymn is *Take my life and let it be consecrated Lord to thee*. but there's the couplet which makes me hesitate: *Take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold*. If it came to the crunch I have my doubts. I don't think Mary would have shared my hesitation. She could have sung such lines with utter integrity. Mary's was a love which gave of its best and gave of its all.

And there is a depth to Mary's love. She doesn't just represent the bells and smells end of the Church – well certainly the smells - she saw beneath the surface of things, she deserves a place among the mystics. On a previous occasion we have seen Mary sitting in contemplation

at Jesus' feet, now we see her weeping at his feet. When Judas complained of her extravagant waste, Jesus said it was because Mary had seen something no-one else had seen. He said, *She bought it for the day of my burial*. In the midst of a relaxed social occasion she saw that that moment had come, she saw the Cross overshadowing the table and she knew that this was the time for his anointing, an anointing for which his violent death would leave no time.

But that doesn't exhaust Mary's qualities. She had an impetuosity, a self-forgetfulness which is both charming and alarming. She would not only be at home among the incense lovers and the mystics but also among the charismatics. She did something for which the only parallel in Holy Scripture is David dancing naked before the Ark of God - she let her hair down. And in the society to which Mary belonged for a woman to do this was outrageous. Tom Wilson in his commentary writes that it was the equivalent of a woman today at a smart dinner party suddenly hitching up her long skirt to the top of her thighs. But Mary was oblivious to any shame or embarrassment as she wiped those blessed, fragrant feet with the loosened tresses of her hair. I can imagine Mary having moments of ecstasy in her worship, utterly self-forgetful, her face and arms uplifted to heaven as she spoke in other tongues.

How different these two sisters were. But what is so encouraging is that Jesus had a place for them both in his Kingdom: Mary, ecstatic, other-worldly; Martha, practical, down-to-earth. The one did not exclude the other, there is ample room in the Church for both of them, and both contribute to its richness. Martha is on record as having criticised Mary at times, and I imagine the same could be said of Mary's attitude to Martha. And we are just the same. The quarrels when it comes to different forms of churchmanship are a disgrace to our faith. We are all tempted to think our way of approaching God is the best.

As one who likes an occasional whiff of incense in a service, I fancy I would have fallen for that perfume whose fragrance filled the house. But there have been times, especially in my first parish, when I have been on the point of calling it a day, of throwing the towel in, and, at one memorable PCC meeting, even threatening to write a letter of resignation to my bishop. At such times nothing beats the aroma of a cup of tea prepared by someone who knows you and still loves you. Mary's precious ointment has about it the fragrance of Heaven, but Martha's cup of tea reminds us of home. Thank God, there is a place in the Church for both Mary's bottle of perfume and Martha's pot of tea.