

Sermon: 2019/04/07 (5th Sunday in Lent) - *Isaiah* 43:16-21; *Psalms* 126; *Philippians* 3:4b-15; & *John* 12:1-8_BTR

[Invite children to the front.]

[Have a platypus soft-toy in hand.]

What *on earth* is this?

Anybody?

Can anybody (here) tell me what this is?

- if it were real, I mean.

[Wait for response.]

Right!

A "platypus."

To be precise:

An aquatic, egg-laying, beaver-tailed, marsupial "monotreme" *with a duckbill* found only in Australia.

You can't eat it:

It is poisonous.

And it doesn't make a good pet:

Platypuses are grumpy, shy, solitary creatures - they don't even like each other very much!

So what, then, is their point?

That's my question!

Why do they exist?

Because they're no good to human beings.

They have no..."utility."

And we tend to think of animals - and all of creation(!) - as existing *for us*; for our benefit.

Animals are *our* food - like a cow,

or *our* transport - like a horse,

or *our* protection - as in a guard-dog.

And certainly, in (the Book of) *Genesis*, God says that we are the boss of the other creatures: we have 'dominion': [1:26,28].

But this isn't to say they were made on our behalf!

Oh no.

Today, in our Old Testament reading (from *Isaiah*), God reminds us that animals - like jackals and ostriches [Is. 43:20b] - are sacred - intrinsically *special* - because *He* made them for *His* pleasure; to 'honor me', says the Lord: [Is. 43:20a].

Let's pray: Father God, ..., in Jesus' name, amen.

[Ask children to leave.]

To me, honestly, Christmas feels like it was only a few weeks ago.

(The weather is still quite cold and wet.)

But we're getting *extremely* close to Easter now:

and you can tell because, in our Bible readings, Jesus is Himself *physically* drawing nearer to Jerusalem, where He will meet His grisly yet glorious fate.

Thus, we see in *John* 12, this morning, that He 'came to Bethany', [v.1] which was almost like a suburb to Jerusalem, the capital city.

It stands just the other side of the Mount of Olives, slightly to the south-east, in what is now called "The West Bank."

And we hear that He chose to rest here before His big entrance at the house of some friends: Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

Jesus is using their place, if you like, as a motel:

He'd been travelling south, on foot, for many weeks.

And, to be precise, He'd actually "over-shot," purposefully, His final destination - in chapter 10 we see that He went all the day down to the place where John the Baptist had baptised Him years before:

an ambiguous, unnamed site called 'across the Jordan': [Jn. 10:40].

The Baptizer, of course, who had been a sort of mentor to Christ, was dead; executed (by Herod).

And I cannot help but wonder if Jesus went there - to what was now an empty, desolate, *depressing* spot - out of nostalgia; to reminisce about His wild, old friend.

And to mentally "steel" Himself for the trial of His passion which was ahead:

It was from exactly that area, of course - 'across the Jordan', that He first faced the Devil in the wilderness.

And now He would see His old (dark) foe again, but in a much more trying, painful *and public* situation.

And there's no question that His enemies in Jerusalem - the "scribes" and the "priests" - were expecting Him:

they had, in fact, already 'tried to arrest Him' once: [Jn. 10:39].

And they weren't going to fail again:

the crowds following Jesus were getting bigger and bigger, and more assertive and confident. Indeed, these crowds had probably begun to resemble something like an army: Luke is unembarrassed to tell us that some of the Apostles were carrying swords: [22:38].

And this holy mob was threatening to the traditional power-holders: the young Christian movement was a "powder-keg," with the potential to overthrow the status-quo.

But, to be clear, Jesus is actually moving *north* toward the city.

And He pauses somewhere where He knows He's earned a free-meal-ticket for Himself and His disciples: at the home of the man He brought back to life - the greatest miracle so far.

It is a familiar, warm place.

Jesus knew the sisters very well - Martha was the maternal one, who took her hosting very seriously. Happy to roll up her sleeves and "do the dishes" - she gave *practical* support to Him; but Mary was devoted in another way - she was exceptionally enamoured with Jesus; *expressive*.

Previously she had thrown herself at His feet to listen, enraptured.

But now, sensing something ominous on "the horizon" - seeing the authorities' net closing around them - their spies and agents were likely openly watching the house - she decides to do something that "throws caution to the wind."

She wants to make a gesture; to *declare* herself; to do something demonstrative which would tell all the world where her heart is - to whom it belongs. [Pause.]

You know, in the "high" days of maritime piracy - in the days of "Blackbeard" and parrots, eye-patches and wooden-legs - from the 1700s - when the Old World was still settling the Americas and the Caribbean, mutinies we're very common: the sailors were often poorly paid, poorly fed and poorly treated; and on-board discipline was harsh.

In such a terribly tense atmosphere - like in Bethany, fights would break out and factions form.

And the penalty for all this was death, so you couldn't have people "sitting on the fence."

Choose a side, right?

Show everybody where your loyalties lie or be thrown to the sharks:

There could be no toleration for "snitches" or potential turn-coats.

The men would gather around on the main-deck - the officers who hadn't been murdered would be standing there too, in chains and shackles, looking very nervous - and members of the crew who hadn't yet joined in with the rioting and the looting would be brought into the center.

And then made to decide at cutless-point.

And one *proved* one's allegiance to the mutineers by an act of "nailing your colours to the mast."

- Taking a strip of your clothing - ripping off a sleeve or whatever - and literally hanging it there as an undeniable, unmistakable *sign* of whose team you belonged to.

A firm handshake - "gentleman's honor" - was nothing among those professional liars and swindlers, cut-throats and criminals.

No, what was needed was *evidence*.

Something that others could point to and say, "Hold on, hold on. You can't pretend otherwise. You can't hide. There is the truth, right there. Your "colours" in full view."

If the British navy caught up to you, they would use these to identify the traitors and hang them.

So, they served to sharpen the pirates' focus - row harder, run faster, load the cannon quicker, tie those knots better.

And I describe this old tradition because it "sheds light" on why Mary poured this 'pound of costly perfume' all over Jesus as He sat at the dinner-table: [Jn. 12:3]. She was "nailing" her "colors" to the mast - to the "mast" of the Gospel and the mast of the Kingdom of God.

It was her way of saying: "I'm with Him" - that amazing young rabbi, for better or for worse, in sickness and in health.

Don't believe me?

Just check out that huge, oily stain on my kitchen floor.

Like grease, right?

It's stubborn.

It lingers.

The only way to get it out of Martha's wooden floor would have been to sand it out!

It's like a monument.

Paint wouldn't cover it.

And Kilz hadn't been invented yet!

And Mary knew all that.

She wanted those spies outside to know it too.

"I'm. With. Jesus."

So, what about you?

We live in a moment when religion is retreating.

When we're encouraged to keep it to ourselves.

When many voices say: "It is a private thing."

"Not your business."

"Don't proselytise." [n.1]

And Mary throws her 'pure nard' in the face of all of that.

I want you to smell it, she yells! Across two millennia.

I want you to "smell" the sweet fragrance of salvation - of new life - of forgiveness

- of knowing God - let this Church and this town be 'filled' with it. Amen.

Let's take a moment to reflect.

Footnotes:

1. See, for example: 'Almost Half of Practicing Christian Millennials Say Evangelism Is Wrong' (5th of February, 2019), *Barna*, <https://www.barna.com/research/millennials-oppose-evangelism/> (accessed April 6, 2019).