

Martin Peacock

Homily on John 12:1–11

What this passage tells us seems quite obvious and familiar. It's simply about love and how love can be costly. It starts with Mary's costly love for Jesus: not only can she probably not afford the nard she buys to anoint Jesus' feet with, but she knows that in so doing she'll make herself a social outcast – and wiping his feet with her hair is really going to be frowned upon. Indeed Judas's criticism of what she does is surely felt by all the other people in the room.

Apart from Jesus, who leaps to her defence and starts talking about his burial. That, and the way the passage ends with the plot to kill Jesus, encourage us to fast forward to Jesus' costly love – his self-sacrificing love for us on the cross.

And that's absolutely it. And yet, whilst I was sure that was absolutely it, I was equally convinced that it wasn't – but it was. I didn't get to solve that contradiction until I read a poem Bridget Higton wrote in Sunday School a few weeks ago. I'll read it to you:

The world can be a cruel place
And so we're told don't trust or it'll be thrown in your face.
But when Jesus comes will you stop following those rules?
Or will you leave him and follow the road for fools?
Jesus calls for us and we must follow
No matter if it leads to pain and sorrow.
For Jesus loves us and calls
And we must answer so we do not fall.

This made me feel rather uncomfortable. Bridget's saying something that's familiar: Jesus loves us and we're asked to follow him. But that startling directness of 'even if it leads to pain and sorrow' got me feeling uncomfortable. And that's what I'd been missing from John's passage – I hadn't felt uncomfortable and knew that I should have been. So I went back and read and re-read it again, and found that John was pulling out all the stops to get us to see that familiar theme of love and costly love in a new light.

The reading has three examples of 'Christian love' that place Mary and Jesus' love in context. I'll call them examples of 'distracted' love. The first is a blink and you'll miss it moment – two words: 'Martha served'. And if you didn't blink and didn't miss it your mind will have been sent back to another Martha / Mary story similar to this one. In it, Martha shows her love for Jesus by serving whilst Mary worships at Jesus' feet, and Martha's a bit annoyed that her kind of love doesn't seem to get the top billing she thinks it deserves. And it is a good example of the kind of love Christians are called to do: we are called to serve.

Then there's Judas – or rather what Judas says: that the money spent on the nard could have been better used to help the poor. Another good example of Christian love – and we know it is, because John has to put in an aside of his own saying that Judas didn't mean what he said as he was a thief who stole from the common purse.

And then there's the chief priests ... Surely no love there, distracted or otherwise. But if we think that, we'd be wrong. These men are the spiritual descendants of Moses, and they know – and want to see their flock uphold – the Ten Commandments. You should love God and love no other god. And here's this upstart from Nazareth performing miracles and people are flocking to him – and what Mary does is clearly akin to divine worship. Their love for God and his people drives them to see Jesus killed. Their love's got profoundly distracted; and it's the very antithesis of Jesus' self-sacrificing love – murder.

And it's Jesus' self-sacrificing – undistracted, costly – love that this passage takes us to. So, armed with those examples of distracted love, let's fast forward to it -or rather let's rewind to it and visit Good Friday. Not much love there – much mocking, hatred, and amazement, but love's in short supply. Perhaps the closest we get is with those women weeping at the foot of the cross, their hearts full of love and compassion for their crucified lord. And they may encourage us to fast forward to our own Good Friday, when, as we are asked to venerate the cross, we are perhaps cast in the role of those women.

I looked it up – veneration. I have a fat dictionary and it give me many words to describe veneration. None of them are love. Of course, we can't love the cross – that instrument of torture and murder – but put Christ on it and the thing is turned on its head. It becomes both symbol and actuality of love in action; of light overcoming darkness, good overcoming evil. And perhaps there's a real danger that, as we look on Christ crucified, we may get distracted from that – distracted from the love.

Let me fast forward you again to show you what I mean. I don't know about you, but when I hear about the latest act of evil committed today – the murder of innocent men, women and children in Syria, for example – my heart is filled with loving compassion for those victims and a loving desire to see that such things are ended. And, often, following on from that, a desire to see the perpetrators – well – killed. And the moment that gets into my heart, I've become a chief priest. My love's been turned to hatred. And that kind of love isn't going to defeat evil because, as we all know, evil responds to it with more of its own.

And even when my response is limited to writing cheques and praying for the victims, perhaps my loving response is no more than a sticking plaster – again, it's not going to stop, to defeat evil. The only loving response that will is Christ's kind – the love that calls out from the cross 'Father, forgive them for they know not what they do'. And that evil can't deal with: 'The light shineth in the darkness and the darkness comprehended it not'.

This is where this passage finally takes us to. So we are being warned that love is costly. It will be very hard to respond to situations with that kind of self-giving, forgiving love. It might often metaphorically crucify us. And I guess that the suggestion is that one day it may actually do so – we may be asked to love with our lives.

I'd like to conclude by re-reading Bridget's poem. Although it wasn't written with this passage in mind, I think it could have been and would have provided a neat and concise homily on it – and saved us a lot of time ...

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