

## Sarah Shaw's Sermon for Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> March 2016 Lent 5

Isaiah 43: 16-21

Ps: 126

Philippians 3: 4b-14

John 12: 1-8

The end is near for Jesus. He's come to Jerusalem for the Passover, and like many pilgrims is staying outside the city walls because Jerusalem would have been so crowded. And he's staying at the home of his friends – Mary, Martha and Lazarus, who Jesus raised from the dead. The one who healed, and restored Lazarus to life is going to the worst of all possible deaths from which he will not save himself.

Imagine the scene. Here we have Martha, serving – as we've seen her before, in the story from Luke's Gospel where she asks Jesus to encourage Mary her sister to help her with the many tasks that need doing. And likewise, Mary is again at the feet of Jesus. But this time, she's anointing him with a gift of perfume that was worth a year's salary. Imagine that! For comparison's sake, the average salary in the UK is £26,000.

And Judas objects. 'That money could have been spent on helping the poor,' he says. Sometimes in the Gospels, those who respond to what Jesus is doing, or what is happening because of Jesus, seem to have the sensible response. Aside from Judas' motives about the money, doesn't what he says seem sensible? Wouldn't we rather see £26,000 spent on helping the poor than doing something so extravagant, even if it is in worship of God? Surely God himself would prefer that?

It's hard for us to imagine having an equivalent choice to make, because we don't have Jesus here in person. But as Jesus points out to Judas, he wouldn't be with *them* much longer. This is a once and lifetime opportunity for Mary to show her love for her Lord. And she doesn't waste this costly opportunity to show her love. Just as the widow in the Temple gave all that she had - a few copper coins, so did Mary. That is what love that is lasting costs – *all* that we have. That is what love cost Jesus – all that *he* had.

Are we prepared to give Jesus all that we have – even when it doesn't make sense? Or is it easier to make excuses to ourselves – especially when they sound sensible? But love is not love if it calculates the cost.

And just what could be the cost of loving Jesus? Mary, we're told, wiped Jesus' feet with her hair having anointed him. No respectable woman of the time would have worn her hair loose. But Mary didn't care what others thought. Are we prepared to give all that we have in the cause of love when it costs our pride, our status – when we possibly endanger ourselves because of it? I find that idea really hard, yet I believe it's what I'm called to.

I was really moved by a story I heard recently about the reformed Synagogue in Bradford. The building - and therefore presence of that worshipping community - had been saved to a very large part thanks to the efforts and goodwill of the local Muslim community. The building was set for closure, but now the necessary repairs have been made to permit worship to continue. Now, a Muslim businessman representing the group who spearheaded the fundraising effort is on the synagogue's ruling body – since February this year. It's a wonderful story – I encourage you to search for it on the internet if you have access – 'How Bradford's last synagogue was saved'. Zulfi Karim, the Secretary of the Bradford Council of Mosques said "It makes me proud that we can protect our neighbours and at the same time preserve an important part of Bradford's cultural heritage." This is love. Love which ignores the criticism - those who would object, and those who would say it was unnecessary.

Because it was completely unnecessary for the mosque leaders to show an interest in saving the last Synagogue in Bradford. Muslims outnumber Jews by 126, 000 – there are only about 300 Jews remaining in Bradford. And the relationship hasn't always been easy. In recent years there has been recrimination on both sides about things said by local politicians about Israel, and incidents of assaults, and race riots as recently as 2001. The leaders involved have agreed that there are some topics of conversation they don't engage in, in order to preserve their friendship.

The Muslim leaders involved in the saving of the synagogue reached out to their Jewish neighbours in a completely unnecessary act of love. Unlike Judas - who found it easier to criticize and object as Mary reached out to Jesus in an act of love - the Muslim leaders didn't stand by. They saw something that needed to be done and took action. And they didn't delay it. Just as Mary didn't wait until Jesus' death and burial to show her love in the form of such extravagance, they didn't wait until another time.

The thing is, that there are some things we can *always* do – and should do. This is what Jesus means when he says ‘the poor will always be with you.’ Not – ignore the poor – but the opposite – *always* be prepared to do something for them. But there are some opportunities to do good that only come along once. If we have an impulse to be generous and big-hearted we should go with it – it surely must come from the God who gave everything to win us with his love, even dying on the cross. Sometimes we are called to do big things – but we are also called to do small, kind things. To say something encouraging to someone; not wasting the opportunity to say something positive to someone; looking for ways to help, rather than criticize.

The cause of love is hard-won, because it doesn't count the cost. But like Jesus' ultimate act of love its effects last, it is eternal. Like Mary's perfume it fills, it pervades, it spreads. There is no ending to that love.

May our lives, our homes, our relationships be like this house of Mary's - filled with the fragrance of love.