

Lord God, open the scriptures by the power of your Spirit that we may see Jesus and receive him today. Amen.

- Today we have an embarrassment of riches in our readings and it is truly difficult to know where to begin! What spoke out at you from the two readings that we have just heard? Let's start by retelling the story.
- It's a meal. Just a few miles from Jerusalem. It's the day before Palm Sunday. Jesus is looking at his ominous, challenging week ahead. He needs the support of his friends, so he goes with his disciples to the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, where true to stereotype, Martha prepares a dinner for him and serves at table. This is just 13 verses after Jesus has raised Lazarus from the dead. You can imagine that Mary and Martha are equally eternally grateful to their friend for bringing their brother back to life from the grave and want to show it.
  - It's all going swimmingly and Martha is pleased she able to give Jesus such hospitality when Mary breaks in in her usual histrionic way. They much have been fairly wealthy because Mary comes in to the dinner with perfume costing 300 denarii, nearly a year's wages. But the way she comes in is scandalous, hair down to her waste, ... she opens the perfume and tips it all over his feet. She then gets down and almost erotically dries them with her hair. Anointing the feet of the one she now believes to be *'the resurrection and the life'*. In the social mores of the time that would be equivalent to hitching your skirt up to your thighs and giving the guest a lingering kiss as you sat down to dinner.
  - *'The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.'* Was that a delicate odour or a cloying smell? It probably depended who you were!
- Mary and Martha, each in their own way showing their complete devotion to the saviour of their brother.
  - Was it competitive? Was each trying to outdo the other? I'm not sure, but the atmosphere must have crackled with tension nevertheless.
- And then Judas, always the fall guy for John when anything critical needs to be said, enters the fray.
  - *'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?'*
- Was he being duplicitous or was he being pragmatic? Was it because he really wanted to steal the money? *'he was a thief'*, says John. Or was it for the perfectly reasonable reason that he thought it was a scandalous waste and Mary was little better than an impudent tart? Or was it, like so many of us, a bit of both? Rather mixed motives!
- And Jesus tells him to leave her alone, and points to his own death, which Judas is instrumental in bringing about, less than a week later.
  - Judas is an example of putting himself first rather than Jesus as it all heads inexorably towards disaster.
  - Whereas Mary and Martha seem to be examples of really strong faith in Christ expressed in a way that was natural to each of them. Different but complementary.
- Which leads us neatly on to the other reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians.
- This is much harder. Lots of text and no story to hang it on. Except there is a story. The story of Paul.
- Paul had been a Pharisee. A strict Jew. One of a group of people who were convinced that if they were only good enough, if they could only manage to keep God's law, they would be sure to earn his love. The focus was all on him, and he begins by sharing his CV, what he had managed to do to prove to God that he was worthy.
- *'circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.'*
- What could be better than that? He'd been doing just what the bible had been telling him to do.
- But, you'll remember, he'd had a bolt from the blue when he'd discovered Jesus on the road to Damascus and he'd started following Jesus and he'd discovered that whereas he'd been focussing on himself and what a good boy he'd been, it was only when he started focussing on Jesus that he discovered *'the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus'*. And it quite literally turned his life and value system upside down.
- One of the issues of having the bible as a holy book is that all too often the translations tone down the language, and I think we lose a little of Paul's shocking vehemence in the translation we have today. According to the

NRSV, Paul wrote in his letter to the Church at Philippi, *'For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ'*. What we miss is that, in the Greek, the word we translate as rubbish is more accurately translated as an earthy word for excrement. So sense Paul's urgency as he writes to the Philippians thus *'For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as crap, in order that I may gain Christ'*!

- What would the PCC say if I submitted written reports like that?! But it maybe gets across the strength of feeling of Paul's letter.
- He repeats the vital nature of turning the spotlight away from himself and what he's managed to do and focussing solely on Jesus *'in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.'*
- So what does it mean to gain Christ, to know him, to have faith in him? How would you explain it in words of one syllable or less for idiot vicars like me?
- Well read on! It's clearly got something to do with death and resurrection.
  - *'I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.'*
- Jesus' death and resurrection are the sacrifice he made for us to make us right with God. The lengths he would go to, to show that he loves us more than we can tell and he wants us to know we are lovable despite the mistakes we make.
- The death and resurrection of Jesus turn the materialistic treachery of Judas, the weak lying of Peter, the unreliability of Thomas, the fear of Mark, the aggression of the Romans, the unyielding unforgiving nature of the law, the capriciousness of the people who shouted 'Hosanna' and 'Crucify' in the same breath, the deviousness of the Pharisees, the self-centred protective smoothness of the Sadducees, ... and the High Priests who were more concerned with political expediency than any form of righteousness or justice ... .
  - Do you recognise yourself in that list? I sincerely hope you do. Otherwise you are in danger of trying to earn your own salvation like Paul.
  - They turn all this rather unpleasant list of human frailty and cruelty into forgiveness and hope and new beginnings as Jesus dies and rises again.
- So to know Christ means a sure foundation on which to build hope and self-belief and forgiveness and justice and mercy. And that's a lifelong task. As Paul says, *'Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.'*
- So let us press on to make it our own as well, not putting the spotlight on us but keeping it fixed firmly on Jesus.
- I think there's something here about preference, and something about patterns of behaviour.
  - The preference of keeping the focus on Jesus rather than on ourselves and the patterns of behaviour that come from challenging our decisions with the question, 'What would Jesus do? WWJD!'
- It doesn't mean you can't have a party. After all Martha did. It doesn't mean you can't waste money. After all Mary did. Both did it with Jesus firmly central in their line of vision. And that maybe dictates how you party, how you waste money!
- But it does mean that you look for ways for Christ to point you towards being prepared to die for him, in order that might truly experience resurrection. After all, if you're going to be raised to life, you've first got to die.
- And if you've tried it you will know that swallowing your pride in order to let someone else have their way, or saying sorry when think the other person is rather more at fault, or making a handsome donation that you really feel to help the victims of the African floods, or not arguing back when you feel unjustifiably treated all feel a little being crucified, taken for granted. What would Jesus do in situations like these? WWJD?
- Don't do it to be a martyr. That's keeping the spotlight on you. Do it because you're modelling your life on Jesus. WWJD. And then as sure as Easter eggs are Easter eggs, the tomb of your self-obsessed feelings of being put-upon and taken for granted will be empty and Christ will have risen in your heart. And that's resurrection. And that the difference putting Christ first really makes. Amen.