

**Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2022**  
**Lent 5 (C)**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**OT: Isaiah 43.16-21**  
**NT: Philippians 3.4b-14**  
**G: John 12.1-8**

What is ahead for you in your life? One thing is for certain. We'll all have to let go of things.

Change is inevitable. Letting go is inevitable.

I was struck by the fact that all of the people we meet in the Bible passages today are letting go of lots of things. I want to spend a little time with them, because what we find out is that as they let go of things, God does new things. God is always up to new things—the writer of Isaiah quotes God who says, “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”

Sometimes it's really hard to perceive, discern, work out, or see what God is up to in the moment. For instance, Imagine being really, really hungry. What if this handful of seed was all that stood between you and starvation? What would you do with it? Grind it up and make one last loaf of bread with it? Cook it and make soup or porridge? Or as hungry as you are, would you have the audacity to take that seed and let it go, by going out and planting it in the ground? Farmers and gardeners know that for a long time, the only thing that can be seen after seeds get planted is barren ground. The only thing to do is to wait and hope for the new growth.

For years, Paul clutched his identity as a righteous and blameless Jew around him like a heavy cloak. Anyone who knew him could see that he was indeed a Hebrew born of Hebrews, that he was a Pharisee who kept all laws, a zealous protector of the Jewish faith.

We know that Paul had this cloak, his identity that he treasured, ripped from him that day on the road to Damascus, when he was blinded by a brilliant light and he heard God's voice asking him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Saul lost his old identity that day. Saul couldn't even see the barren ground that the farmer so hopefully watches. He couldn't see anything, because he was blind. Saul eventually got his sight back. God even gave him a new name—Paul. Paul let go of his old life and took up his new life as a follower of Jesus.

Paul experienced beatings, imprisonments, hatred, distrust, and betrayals as his new life in God unfolded. His new life must have seemed like barren ground at times—he could only wait on God with faith and hope as he endured all the suffering that he experienced because he had let go of the old and put on the new.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus is in Bethany, visiting his friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Jesus had recently raised Lazarus to life after he had been dead and buried for several days. Now, Mary is holding in her hands a whole pound of costly perfume made with pure nard, an exotic plant that grew far away in the Himalayas. The Gospel doesn't tell us where Mary got this perfume, or when she bought it, but we can probably imagine that she has used it sparingly because it is a luxury. She has saved it like a wine connoisseur would save a rare fine wine by hiding it away in a wine cellar to share on some momentous occasion. She chooses today to give this away to anoint Jesus.

Imagine this scene. See Mary hold the bottle, hear Mary open the bottle, and observe her deliberately pour every last drop of this valuable substance onto the feet of Jesus. Smell the fragrance filling the room. Watch in disbelief as this valuable, fragrant liquid runs off Jesus' feet. What doesn't end up in Mary's hair as she wipes his feet runs onto the stone floor. The fragrance must have lingered in the house for months afterward, a reminder of Mary's extravagant wastefulness.

So, what new things is God up to in each of these stories?

God took the last seeds that the Israelites planted in the barren ground, and as they waited in hope, God turned those seeds into an abundant harvest—sheaves of wheat that the Israelites brought in from the fields at harvest time with rejoicing.

Paul can't see what his new life will bring. But Paul waits with faith and hope for God to grow a new thing in him, and God has given him the grace to have only one desire left—as Paul puts it, “to gain Christ and to be found in him...to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings.”

Paul waits faithfully for that new thing that God will do in him, the transformation of who he is into the person he will become, a person who forgets what lies behind and strains forward to what lies ahead—the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Paul could never have foreseen what an abundant harvest God would bring out of his difficult ministry to the Gentiles. An abundant harvest of believers grew up into new communities of faithful Christians spread far and wide. We are part of that harvest—we are descendants of these early Christians.

In John's Gospel, the new thing that God was about to do through the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross was not something that Mary could see as she anointed Jesus with her costly gift. She could only act in faith and in hope that God must be up to something new, even in the death of Jesus.

Mary lavishly anoints the feet of Jesus because she knows that her friend is about to suffer and to die. Jesus confirms this knowledge on Mary's part. “Leave her alone,” he says to Judas. “She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.” Mary must have suffered as she anticipated the death of her friend, not knowing that God would raise Jesus

from the dead after his crucifixion, death, and burial. Not knowing what was ahead, Mary poured out her gratitude and love on Jesus as she anointed his feet. She didn't know what new thing God was up to, but she did know that her sacrificial love for Jesus would last beyond the grave, into eternity.

As John's story turns to the final days of Jesus' life, those who accompany Jesus on his journey to the cross include not only Mary, a faithful disciple who devotes herself and all that she has to Jesus, but also Judas, the unfaithful disciple who steals from the common purse and will betray Jesus. Both are included in John's story of Jesus' death, both the one who is faithful and the one who is not, and their inclusion tells us a great deal about the meaning of the cross and the inclusive nature of God's grace.

Whilst we here in this church understand the inclusive nature of God's grace and love, there are others who do not. There are people who believe that a person who is gay should undergo conversion therapy in order to be 'healed'. Thankfully our government this week have banned this practice, but they failed to include those who are transgender. This is not the right message to send to the LGBTQI community and I hope this decision is overturned. There are people who profess to be Christian and yet use their position to preach a message of bigotry and homophobia. In May, Franklin Graham will be coming over to Liverpool to do just that. Thankfully, we at Liverpool Parish Church will be holding an event that clearly shares the inclusive message of the Gospel, that all are welcome and loved- just as they are.

When we struggle to carry our own crosses through the valleys of suffering and loss, when we can't imagine or believe that God is up to a new thing, today's Bible passages remind us that we are travelling in a great company of faithful people who have gone before us, hopefully, faithfully, and with extravagant love.

The people that we've spent time with today remind us that what we can do even in the midst of suffering and death in the barren times of our lives, is simply to let go.

Like them, we can plant our seeds with hope. We can faithfully let go of our own plans and wait on God. Lent can be a time of letting go and waiting to see what God has in store.

We can let go of what holds us back from sharing our love, and extravagantly pour out our love for God by loving one another with sacrificial love. We can let go of our prejudices, our negative thoughts and judgements about others. We can embrace a truly inclusive and loving Gospel.

Even when all seems lost, our ancestors in the faith remind us to believe that God is really is up to something new and extravagant and beyond our imaginations. Let us pray that God is working in the hearts and minds of all, in order to bring about a totally inclusive society-free from prejudice and bigotry.

I challenge us to let go of all that holds us back and press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Jesus Christ.

The Revd Jennifer Brady

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