

John 12:1 to 8 – March - 9.30 am

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord our strength and our redeemer Amen.

The first verse of John 12 is a story about a journey, in this case Jesus' journey to Jerusalem by way of Bethany, where he went to meet his friends.

A man on a trip to Israel was horrified when quoted an outrageous price to be ferried across the Sea of Galilee. As he stalked off in disgust he was heard muttering, 'No wonder Jesus walked'.

Jesus' ministry journey was nearing its end. To go to Jerusalem was a very brave act because the Jewish authorities had declared him to be an outlaw.

John 11:57 reads, "Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that anyone who knew where Jesus was must report it, so that they might arrest him"

But even without that knowledge, Jesus knew that to go to Jerusalem was certain death, because he knew that his hour had come.

For me the journey that Jesus made to Jerusalem, knowing what he knew, has to be one of the most courageous journeys ever made.

There are also times in our lives of course when we also need to make life-changing decisions about whether we are to follow our own desires or to follow Christ.

These decisions also take great courage and determination, but the rewards will always outweigh the cost in the long run.

History is full of people who made the right decisions and whose journey through life is an inspiration to us all, and in many cases we admire them for their courage and determination.

History of course is also full of those who turned away from God and who will only be remembered for their barbaric behaviour towards other people.

Our reading picks up Jesus' journey just as Jesus and his disciples reach Bethany, a small town just outside Jerusalem. Now Jesus and his disciples would have gone to Bethany for several reasons.

Firstly, it was because at Passover time all the accommodation in Jerusalem would have been full, because of all the pilgrims who had arrived for Passover.

To get a place in Jerusalem at Passover meant booking well in advance. If you remember, Joseph and Mary also had the same problem of finding accommodation at the time when Jesus was born, Jerusalem was and still is a very popular place.

Another reason of course was that he had friends, such as Mary and Martha living in Bethany, particularly Lazarus, who he had raised from the dead.

Bethany was also a recognised place for pilgrims to stay who couldn't get a place in Jerusalem, because it was so close and convenient.

When Jesus and his disciples arrived in Bethany, Martha, Mary and Lazarus were so pleased to see them that they laid on a special meal for them, which after their long journey was I'm sure very welcome.

Jesus' public ministry, which began for Jesus at a wedding feast in Cana, moves to its close with another social occasion at Bethany; however the mood of Jesus and his disciples is of course strikingly different on this occasion.

At Cana Jesus and his disciples were embarking on an adventure, here the adventure is coming to a dramatic end.

I'm sure we've all been on wonderful holidays where at the beginning we are looking forward to seeing new things and doing new things, and then all too quickly we are packing up our things to go back home.

That's possibly how the disciples may have felt because they would almost certainly have sensed that things were different, that things were coming to a conclusion in some way or another.

For me the story revolves around three principle people; Martha, Mary and Judas Iscariot.

First there's Martha. She was serving at table, and she probably cooked the meal as well.

She loved Jesus; she was a practical woman; and the only way in which she could show her love was by the work of her hands.

That's how many of us show our love for God by the work that we do, because all honest work is God's work.

Adrian Plass, the well known Christian author, told an audience in Reading that everything he did from washing up to writing was worshiping God.

St Paul wrote to the Colossians, "Whatever you are doing, work at it with enthusiasm, as working for the Lord and not for people, because you know that you will receive your inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Jesus Christ you are serving."

Then there's Mary. Mary was the one who above all loved Jesus; and here in her action of anointing Jesus we see three things about true love

We see love's extravagance. Mary took the most precious thing she possessed; a pound of costly perfume made from pure nard, and spent it all on Jesus.

Love is not love if it starts by calculating the cost. Love gives its all and it's only regret is that it has not still more to give.

We see love's humility. It was a sign of honour to anoint a person's head. Psalm 23 reads, "Thou anointest my head with oil", but Mary would not look so high as Jesus' head; so in her humility she anointed his feet.

We see love's unselfishness. Mary wiped Jesus' feet with her hair. In the Middle East no respectable woman would ever appear in public with her hair unbound.

Mary loved Jesus so much that it was nothing to her what others thought; she gave her heart and soul to Jesus.

Lastly, there's Judas, in John chapter 6 verses 70 and 71, John shows us that Jesus is well aware that there was a traitor within the ranks when Jesus says, "I chose the twelve of you, didn't I? Yet one of you is a devil!"

He was of course talking about Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. For Judas, even though he was one of the twelve disciples, was destined to betray Jesus to the chief priests"

However very early on Jesus tried to touch Judas' heart by making him the treasurer of the company of apostles.

In doing that Jesus was in effect saying to him, "Judas, here's something that you can do for me, here is proof that I need you and trust you", but the appeal failed to change Judas' character.

But the fact remains that often the best way to guide someone who is going astray, or who has the wrong attitude, is to treat them, not with suspicion, but with trust; not as if we expected the worst from them, but as if we expected the best from them.

Secondly, Jesus would not have put Judas in charge of the money unless he had some capabilities in that direction, and perhaps it was that very ability which gave him the opportunity and which led him into crime.

Thirdly we can see how a man's view can be warped. Judas had just seen an action of surpassing loveliness when Mary anointed Jesus' feet with perfume; and he could only call it extravagant waste.

Although he had seen, and lived with the most wonderful man who ever lived, he still developed into an embittered man, and took an embittered view of life, and was quite able to misinterpret the finest of actions.

A person's sight depends on what is inside him. He sees only what he is fit and able to see.

A warped mind brings a warped view of things; and, if we find ourselves becoming very critical of others and imputing unworthy motives to them, we should stop examining them and start examining ourselves.

Finally Matthew 27 verses 3 to 5 contains three sentences about Judas, firstly St Matthew wrote, "When Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented"; secondly, Judas said, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood"; thirdly, "He departed and hanged himself".

What Judas did was evil, but he repented, and I am confident that, through Judas' repentance and the infinite love of God, Judas is with Jesus in heaven.

Jesus said as recorded in Luke 15 verse 7, "I tell you in the same way there will be more rejoicing over one sinner who repents than over ninety nine righteous persons who do not need to repent."

So let us finish by continuing this positive note of love, with Mary, whose love for Jesus knew no bounds. There is in the story of Mary a great truth about life.

Some things we can do almost any time, but some things we will never do, unless we grasp the chance when it comes, and it may only come round once.

We may be seized with the desire to do something fine, generous and big-hearted. But we put it off; we will do it tomorrow; and the fine impulse goes, and the thing never gets done.

Life is an uncertain thing. We think to utter some word of thanks or praise or love but we put it off; and often the word is never spoken.

Mary wanted to be generous in her love for Jesus and she didn't hesitate in taking the opportunity, and her single act of love is now known by millions of Christians around the world.

Mary saw her one chance to express her great love for Jesus, and she took it.

Let us remember to do things now, for the chance so often never comes round again, and the failure to do them, especially the failure to express love, can often bring sad memories and regrets.

And because our story this morning is essentially about God's infinite love and Mary and Martha's love for Jesus, I leave you with this thought for the day.

God does not love us because we are beautiful, we are beautiful because God loves us.

Amen