Sermon on Lent 5 Year C 2019
(John 12:1-8; Philippians 3:4b-14)

I was at the medical clinic getting an allergy shot and was chatting to the nurse about the beautiful weather and getting out and enjoying it. We both agreed that it would be shame not to and yet how guilty many of us feel for doing just that; shouldn’t we be working harder, being more practical, more efficient with our time?

We agreed that the blasé, almost meaningless word, balance, was what we were looking for, we laughed; I said, “well, see you next month;” she said, “you bet.” And that was that; it was time for her to administer her next cure; it was time for me to get to a coffee shop where I could answer my emails, work on a bulletin and pen these words. Efficiency, practicality; meanwhile, outside, the sun shone gloriously.

I’m sure this type of conversation is common enough; possibly most of us have been involved in such a conversation many times; perhaps it’s so “ordinary” that we can’t even recall when we had some sort of similar exchange of sentiments.

Underneath its ordinariness though is this niggling feeling, if you will, this wondering, maybe even a fear; what’s an ordinary life supposed to feel like? Am I missing out on something important (fomo)?

Or maybe even this question: what might it mean to live an ordinary life in an extraordinary way? Is that a contradiction?

the texts given to us this week at least give us some hope that these sorts of questions were being addressed in Jesus’ ministry and therefore might provide some light for us.

The story given to us by John, set one week before Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem and two weeks before his death (which is why the lectionary editors have us read it a week before Holy Week begins) is a quintessential gospel story.

For several reasons: it’s centered around a meal and around unhurried conversation; things that may strike us quite ordinary, something that you and I have experienced.

The modern riposte might be: a meal in a house and unhurried conversation? Get with the times man, it’s screaming in a pub while eating over-priced appies and beer.

Okay point taken, but you get the drift, all of us can imagine this sort of thing and perhaps we even get to experience it from time to time.

As an aside, there’s a reason besides Jesus’ explicit command at the last supper that the central act of Christian worship is a meal, or the symbols, if you will, of a meal! It’s because the typical setting of Jesus’ ministry whether teaching or healing or conversation often revolved around food.

But of course, what the gospels do so dramatically and convincingly is combine “ordinary” elements with the extraordinary. And by extraordinary, I don’t just mean what Jesus does, like turning an afternoon picnic into the feeding of the five thousand, but extravagant acts of commitment by those who experience him.

So, famously, in Matthew’s gospel, the fraudster, lil’ Zachaeus, not his rap handle, but the fact that he was little, makes the announcement at the supper table, that if he’s ripped anybody off, he’ll pay them back four-fold!

Here, we have Mary pouring out a perfume so expensive that it would have taken an average labourer a full year to pay for it!

This is extravagance defined! Why? Because she’s so deeply grateful to Jesus that he raised her brother, Lazarus from the dead.

Surgeons tell of parents showing up to the hospital, gifts in hand, after a life-saving operation for a child, so there’s a psychological realism to the scene even as we understand how momentous and strange it is.

Here the act of extravagant gratefulness sets up the conflict in the story, a conflict about a fundamental choice about what’s important in human living.

The meal that is unfolding reminds us of another meal that Luke tells us about; a meal at which Martha is bustling around the house, efficiently making sure that the roast is cooking properly, that the servants are doing what they’re supposed to do

And what is Mary doing, she’s sitting at Jesus’ feet listening to what he is saying and Martha is none too happy.

On that occasion, Jesus says to Martha, “Martha, Martha, you’re anxious and troubled about many things but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good part, which will not be taken away from her.”

Here in John’s Gospel, there are no words, just actions, “Martha served” and “Lazarus sat at the table” (why is it men are always just sitting around?)

 And Mary: the pouring of the lb of pure nard combines extravagance with just enough weirdness (wiping Jesus’ feet with her hair) that it’s tinged with scandal; it feels like a scene straight out of a Robertson Davies novel.

Psychologists tell us that the most memorable moments in our lives are those that involve our sense of smell; the smallest whiff of a scent can take us back to a specific moment in our childhood, this because smell is processed in the same part of the brain as emotion:

The smell of grilled Kraft Velveeta cheese food (it isn’t really cheese!) and I’m back to age six, legs swinging under my chair as my mother worries over the pot of soup.

Whenever the disciples would have smelt nard they would have been back in this scene, the musky odor, both earthy and sweet filling the entire house.

They also would never have forgotten what Judas said at that moment: “Why was this perfume not sold for 300 denarii—somewhere between 24,000 and 35,000 dollars in today’s terms—and the money given to the poor?”

John throws us off the scent of the conflict (pun intended) by telling us about Judas in a way that smacks of sour grapes.

Here’s the thing, whatever Judas ends up doing, here the fact that he is even more practical and efficient than Martha is not to his detriment but to his credit: he’s right isn’t he?!

Most of us if we’re honest—I certainly count myself in this camp—find ourselves much more beholden, trapped even, to go back to my opening illustration, in ways of acting that are more like Martha’s and holds onto attitudes much more like Judas’

But, and here’s where the story draws us into this conflict, it is precisely the attitudes exhibited by Judas that Christ wants us to repent of.

Why? Because, to put it bluntly, efficiency, utility and pragmatism are a poison to our soul and have well-nigh ruined the earth!

But, but, we protest, what about responsibility? What about using money wisely, what about our time, talent and treasure; we’ve even got a hallowed word for it: stewardship!

Yes! But it’s a case of which is first, the cart or the horse; if we, like Judas, can in the face of an act of passionate commitment, when it’s beauty is filling the room and yet we can question it’s utility and practicality, we will find that we’re learning to ignore and suppress the most important thing of all: Love, Love of God and Love of Neighbour as the raison d’etre, of humankind; the extravagant love that actually fuels a practicality and stewardship that does not oppress but draws us forward into beauty and purpose.

The most “efficient societies” that have ever existed, Leninist and Maoist communism and global market-driven capitalism have killed 10’s of millions or have raped the earth to such a degree that it will take a miracle to recover.

Economics and Politics that forgets the primacy of Love of God born of gratefulness, traps us in patterns of living that rob us of our human distinctiveness.

On a personal level, I have, in the name of efficiency, walked right past a homeless person, in order that I might do the job that encourages all of us not to walk right past a homeless person!

It’s not passionate commitment, even extravagant commitment that should scare us, but cold-hearted efficiency.

What Lent asks us to consider, what this story asks us to wrestle with is that an ordinary life becomes disordered if not founded on a great love; the flip side is that human life becomes extraordinary even if it looks ordinary if that love is present.

This one thing I do, Paul says in our second reading, I consider everything rubbish in comparison to knowing Christ. Does this mean that everything else we enjoy is rubbish? No, Paul’s exaggeration is meant to order our lives, not after the manner of law or practicality but by and for Love.

When we do, then we will find that the tasks we need to do will not ignore the actual people involved in them; then we will find that our service is not about building our own egos but truly for others; then we may begin to treat the poor, not as a project to be fixed but as extensions of Christ himself, people with whom we share the mystery of life and love. Amen.