



## Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Fifth Sunday of Lent

readings: [Isaiah 43 16-21](#); [Philippians 3 4b-14](#), [John 12 1-8](#)

3 April 2022

A wise old ministerial friend, who did a lot of pastoral visiting, told me that you can always tell a lot about an individual by the books you see on their bookshelves. A little concerned by this, I examined my own. I find that alongside a range of political biographies, theology and education books, and my own writings (a somewhat slim collection), I have a disturbingly extensive section of books such as Diana Athill's reflections on the fortitude and endurance required to face death as it increasingly comes to meet you, entitled "*Somewhere Towards the End*", Richard Holloway's "*Waiting for the Last Bus: Reflections on Life and Death*", and Kathryn Mannix's "*With the End in Mind: Dying, Death and Wisdom in an Age of Denial*", not to mention Peter and Elizabeth Fenwick's magisterial study of "*The Art of Dying: A Journey to Elsewhere*": all of which a librarian would categorise under the generic title: "Death and Dying: intimations of mortality". And then there is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "*Notes on Grief*" a memoir on the loss of a much-loved family member, particularly appropriate on this day as we continue to mourn Mat Mawson, a verger here for 17 years, and a much-loved member of our Cathedral family who faced his death with fortitude and endurance.

Today, the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent is Passion Sunday, when "Passiontide begins". It is a day when we consider "Death and Dying: intimations of mortality", in this case the death of Jesus. As you will probably know well, the word 'passion' comes from the Latin meaning 'suffering' or 'endurance'. Hence Passion Sunday is not about romantic love or eros, which can be self-seeking or self-fulfilling. The love of which the gospel speaks, agápē, is a love which is more to do with self-surrender in the service of others. And that self-surrender can come at the cost of endurance of suffering or even death.

So to hijack some of my book titles: on our Lenten journey towards Easter, "A Journey to Elsewhere", we are "Somewhere Towards the End". On this Passion Sunday we are enjoined to reflect on life and death and on the fortitude and endurance necessary to face it; we are to work "With the End in Mind".

In some churches on this day, crosses are veiled to signify the awesome yet grace-full mystery that is shortly to unfold at Easter, the revelation of the awe-inspiring presence of God, incarnate in the person of a man so full of grace that he was even prepared to die for us. As St Paul writes in Romans chapter 5: "Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners, Christ died for us". No wonder the crosses are veiled in the face of this awesome mystery of grace. But our faith is that we will all stand one day 'beyond the veil' as the mystery is fully revealed, where we believe Mat is standing now.

Two former clergy colleagues have written to me about Mat. One remembers being vergered into an empty Cathedral for Evening Prayer, and Mat saying 'we're praying with the saints and angels tonight'. My former colleague confidently asserts "Well he's certainly praying with them now". Another describes Mat as being "a very special person touched by tragedy", but goes on to say: "and now the tragedy is resolved by love".

The Passion story is also "a tragedy resolved by love": not just the love for us shown by a man prepared to endure death for our sakes, but in the love shown to Jesus by those who loved him, the same quality of love shown to Mat as he too journeyed to his death. So the unveiling of the Passion story is preceded by today's lectionary gospel with its simple vignette which roots it all in earthly reality. Jesus is 'anointed' for the journey that lies ahead of him, not in some great sacred ceremonial, but in the simple yet profoundly gracious loving act of a grateful woman. Mary in gratitude for the restoration of her brother Lazarus by Jesus, simply takes a jar of costly perfume; she anoints the feet of Jesus; she wipes his feet with her hair.

By so doing she anticipates the actions of Christ himself, who on Maundy Thursday washes and wipes his disciples' feet. Yet she anticipates too, as Jesus himself predicts, the anointing of his body, broken on the Cross, in preparation for its burial. A Cross no longer veiled but coming into fearful sight.

Judas however will have none of this. For him it is a question of priorities, earthly priorities. Could not this costly perfume have been sold and the money given to the poor? Judas purports to speak for the poor, at least on the surface. We could be charitable and see his words as reflecting a radical concern for the underdog, the outcast and the marginalised. We could argue that his later traitorous betrayal was actually driven by a Zealot's desire to force Jesus's hand into declaring an armed rebellion to overthrow the hated Roman oppressor. The gospel writers will have none of this casuistry: for them Judas was simply a thief, motivated merely by money, be it money for the common purse which selling the perfume could enhance and he could embezzle, or 30 pieces of pharisaic silver, the reward for information leading to the capture and arrest of Jesus his Lord.

Either way, Jesus will have none of it: "You will always have the poor with you. You will not always have me". The irony of this passage is striking: Judas appears to speak for the poor; Mary appears to indulge in wasteful action. But it is not Judas who reflects true prophetic concern for the outcast and marginalised. It is Mary who is the real prophet in this story, who recognises that the hour has now come, that the crisis is imminent, who anoints Jesus "With the End in Mind" (that book title again!).

As the prophet Isaiah tells us in our OT lesson, none of the wonders of the exodus from Egypt, the succour in the wilderness, and the liberation of Israel from bondage, can be compared to the new redemption that God is about to bring about: "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" It is a shattering of the prevailing paradigms, a change of focus on to what is really important, a radical transformation of individual lives (the transformation to which St Paul himself personally attests in our NT lesson).

So "Somewhere Towards the End", the final journey begins:

A journey from the *Anointing* by Mary on this Passion Sunday

A Journey to the *Adoration* of the crowds on Palm Sunday

A journey through the *Anguish* of the Cross on Good Friday

A journey to the *Achievement* of the victory over death on Easter Day.

As we prepare to walk again with our Lord on his journey of endurance and suffering, we are not called to be bystanders, but rather up-standers, to stand up and be counted for what he taught, what he believed, what he was prepared to die for. We are called to stand up for the unsupported poor in the cost-of-living crisis, for the bombed civilians of Ukraine, for the forgotten hostages left in Iran.

We are not called to be sightseers as the man on the donkey rides by, as the man staggers past carrying his Cross.

We are not called to be mere observers of his death, but instead to leave at the foot of the Cross our false ideas of status and greatness, our selfishness and sin.

'Death has been swallowed up in victory', the victory of the Cross, the victory of love. And so we are called to live out that victory, day by day, in our lives dedicated in the service of the God of love.

That journey of love begins again today..."With the End in Mind".

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