

Good Friday

(Isaiah 52:13-53:12 / Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9 / John 18:1-19:42)

18.04.2014

I don't know how many times I have read the Passion Narrative in St John's gospel.

We listen to it every Good Friday, so I have listened to it at least once a year for decades and I have read it many more times than that.

I have always been struck by what we could call the epilogue of John's Passion Narrative: the story of Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus coming to take the body of Jesus away for burial. I find this part of the story comforting. After the preceding drama, a great peace emanates from this ending to the story.

But this year, for the first time, one particular detail in this final section of the Passion Narrative caught my attention.

The detail that tripped me up is contained in verse 39 of chapter 19 of John's gospel. We read there: (*Nicodemus*) *brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds.*

What a vast quantity that was to anoint the body of Jesus!

It seems exaggerated that Nicodemus should bring this amount of oil and spices for Jesus' burial rites.

It is certainly out of proportion with what was needed for one body.

Intrigued by this detail I examined it more closely.

Among the things I discovered was that one early Jewish critic of the Christian presentation of the Passion story honed in on this particular detail to say that it is a *give away* in regard to the inauthenticity of the whole gospel account.

The amount of perfume Nicodemus brought would have been enough to anoint hundreds of bodies, the critic claims.

His conclusion is that, given the inclusion of such a ridiculous detail in the story, the early Christians must have made the whole thing up.

In response to that I would say that the author of the Fourth Gospel would have known that the amount of perfume he says Nicodemus brought for Christ's burial ablutions was way above what was required. John would have known that it was enough to anoint hundreds of bodies and yet he insisted on inserting this detail. So we must ask what significance this detail had for him.

Stemming from that question another more important question arises.

What is the significance of this detail for us?

I suggest that it was/that it is a reminder of the great love the person of Jesus awoke in His disciples. The great love awoken in Jesus' disciples was nourished especially by their meditation upon His Sacred Passion

I believe we can see the response of Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus to Jesus as representative of the response the evangelist wanted to awaken in all those who would read his account of the Passion story.

The whole of John's gospel account is the story of God's love revealed in the life-giving ministry and saving passion of Jesus. Telling that story, this gospel wishes to call forth from us, its readers, love in return for love.

The word *passion* has two meanings.

It speaks not only of *deep suffering*; it is also of *great love*.

The amount of perfume the disciples brought to anoint the dead body of Jesus bears testimony to the immensity of their love for Christ and how much they valued their relationship with Him or rather His relationship with them.

By this allusion to the oil and spices brought by Joseph and Nicodemus for Jesus' burial we are sent back to other gospel scenes which also speak of great love for Jesus being displayed through the anointing of His body.

We are led to think of the anointing of Jesus by Mary at Bethany: that incident that brought out Judas' annoyance and served to unmask his true feelings in regard to Jesus.

We are also led to think of the anointing which Luke's gospel has performed by a sinful woman in the house of the Pharisee.

You may remember how in the Passion narrative according to Mark we are told that wherever the Passion story is recounted the gesture of the woman who anointed Jesus' feet in the house of Simon the leper would be recalled.

The objections raised to the anointing of the body of Jesus (be that by the sceptical Jewish critic of the early centuries of the Christian era who dismissed the detail John included in today's gospel passage as pure rubbish, or be they those of the onlookers in the other gospel scenes involving the women who anointed Jesus' feet) all point to one thing: the fact that these extravagant displays of love were met with righteous indignation by religious people who looked on.

I suggest that this apparently righteous indignation of these religious people was in fact an expression of the embarrassment these onlookers felt.

Let's be careful not to condemn them too quickly, as if we are never embarrassed by love.

The truth is that we can all feel embarrassment before extravagant displays of love. Frequently those embarrassed most are religious people.

Let's be honest and ask ourselves: just how do we cope with extravagant, foolish displays of love when we see them played out before our eyes?

For example, how do we react when we see a couple who are madly in love embrace each other passionately at the departure or arrival gates in the airport?

But, more than that, how do we react to extravagant gestures of love in our own lives?

Let's face it, many of us simply cannot cope with the depth of love others display – and, as I said, even and especially, in the depth of love which is sometimes displayed in our own regard.

Likewise, we can also be afraid of the depth of love we ourselves feel for others.

Love is something we long for. Love is something we long to know for another and to receive from another. And yet love can frighten and even terrify us.

It can lead us to put up barriers and raise objections to it.

We react like this as a defence against love's attraction which we experience as somehow weakening us.

For, yes, love makes both the lover and the one loved feel vulnerable.

We speak of love's *melting effect* upon people.

The truth is that we can be afraid of melting away, getting lost in love.

We know the truth of Jesus' words that love leads us to *lose our life, to give our life*.

And so we resist love.

We resist love because we want to hold on to our lives. We resist love because we want to cling to ourselves. We are afraid of the death to self that love demands of us.

I remember once reading this line: *The world has never been able to cope with depth in people's love for Christ!*

How true that is!

When we think of it, did Jesus not warn His followers of this even before His death?

Jesus was totally honest with His disciples when He told them that they would be *persecuted, stoned, rejected, hounded from place to place, accused falsely, slandered and reviled, put to death for His sake and that of the Gospel*.

I referred yesterday evening at the celebration of the Lord's Supper to the place where Pope Francis chose to live the celebration of the Lord's Supper last year: in a prison, a Detention Centre for young people.

I drew attention to how significant that setting was/is for the celebration of a Eucharist in which the Passover Meal is recalled: a place in which people long for and look forward to freedom

This evening, like all the Popes of recent times, Pope Francis will go to the Colosseum in Rome for the Celebration of the Way of the Cross.

This setting is also particularly significant.

Those who gather this evening in the Colosseum will remember not only Jesus' way to Golgotha in Jerusalem and His Passion upon the cross on that holy hill; they will also recall the response of the early Christians of Rome to Christ's great love.

The participants at this evening's celebration in the Colosseum will remember the depth of love our forbears in the faith showed by their martyrdom as they responded to the extravagant love of God revealed in Christ Jesus.

The early Roman martyrs, like Christian martyrs of every age and generation, made of their own lives nothing less than an extravagant gift to Christ.

The Scriptures speak of all of us being called *to make of our very lives a fragrant offering to God*.

We are called to offer our very selves as a sweet perfume.

The reason for the Roman persecution of Christians from the perspective of secular historians may well have been political, but from the point of view of the Christian martyrs it was due to a loyalty of deep devotion and love for Jesus.

It was a demonstration of their extravagant love for Christ, in response to His extravagant love for them (and all God's People) revealed on the cross.

The extravagance of love demonstrated by the early Christian martyrs and countless other great Christian witnesses over the centuries has been described by some as *holy madness*.

Those truly passionate for Christ in every age and generation may well have been written off by some (and this may still be the case today) as *holy simpletons*, people aflame with the passion of *mad, crazy love*.

But the madness of these people is nothing less than a reflection of the folly of God which St Paul speaks of in his Letter to the Galatians.

Let us be in no doubt: *the extravagance of love is the very stuff of God Himself!*

Three words of Richard Rolle in his book *'The Fire of Love'* describe fairly accurately what we see displayed in all the accounts of the anointing of Jesus' body (his head and his feet) both before and after His burial. Those three words are simply: *Love without measure*.

That is what Christ's death on Calvary reveals: *Love without measure*.

That is what our meditation of His Sacred Passion is meant to awaken within us: *Love without measure*.

Jesus' revelation of God's *mad, crazy love* calls forth from us an extravagant response in return.

*The extravagance of love which is the very stuff of God* should be the very stuff of our lives too!