

John 12:1-8

Hallelujah is our song

by Vicar Albert Romkema

Introduction

There was a movie made a few years ago, adapted from a book, titled *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel. It is really a remarkable story of a family who owned a zoo who decides to immigrate to Canada from India. So they pack up all their animals and take passage on a large boat across the Pacific. On the way they encounter a massive storm which capsizes their boat and no one survives except the son (whose name is Pi) and a hyena, a zebra, an orangutan, and a 450 lbs Bengal tiger (whom Pi names Richard Parker). They end up together on a life raft drifting in the middle of the Pacific Ocean for 227 days.

Soon after they are all together on the life raft the hyena kills the zebra and the orangutan but then is itself killed by the tiger. The rest of the movie is about the journey of these two remaining characters - the boy, Pi, and the Bengal tiger, Richard Parker, together on the life raft.

The tiger, of course, sees the boy as a meal but the Pi continually fights him off and eventually escapes him by constructing a floatation device which he tethers to the back of the boat, out of the reach of Richard Parker. Despite this, as time goes by the boy begins caring for the tiger, feeding him at a distance, protecting him; he even helps him back onto the boat after he falls off into the water.

After many other trials together they eventually discover land and the boy jumps face first onto the beach. The tiger jumps off the boat too, steps over the boy and walks toward the jungle. As the tiger is walking away the boy whispers to the retreating animal, "look back, just look back – acknowledge our relationship in some way"; looking for some sign of kinship or gratitude from the tiger he had protected for those 227 days on the sea. But the tiger just walks away and disappears into the woods, not looking back even once.

As I left the theatre after watching this movie I was all at once struck by the notion that the boy could represent God, and the tiger, us humans. God (Pi) cares for, helps, serves, and protects us while we seem at times unwilling or unable to reciprocate that love (Richard Parker). If we are honest with ourselves we may admit that at times we live lives that are unappreciative, unloving, and preoccupied; perhaps not even knowing exactly how we are supposed to respond to the love of God that surrounds us always.

In our gospel text for today Mary demonstrates such a response; it is unbashful, unself-conscious, and brazen.

The Text - Setting the scene

Jesus is in Bethany, a city just outside of Jerusalem. Bethany is the place where Lazarus and his two sisters lived. Sometime before the Passover Jesus had gone to Bethany to aid his sick friend (the "friend he loved" it says in John 11:3) only to discover, after arriving, that Lazarus had already died 4 days earlier – long enough that his body already smelled, decomposing; long enough that Jesus stood in front of his tomb and wept for his friend.

Then the grief-stricken Jesus performed perhaps his most profound miracle; he raises his 4 day dead, decomposing friend Lazarus from the grave.

Many who witnessed this miracle followed Jesus and many more who had heard about it sought him out with hope in their hearts.

This was too much for the Pharisees and the chief priests – they were threatened by Jesus - and so they essentially put out an arrest warrant for Jesus, to find him and to kill him. The Jews had actually opposed Jesus for some time already. They had tried to arrest him in chapter 7 and to stone him in chapter 8 and 10 (twice).

The end is near

The reason I am telling you all this is so that you can get a clear picture that time is closing in on Jesus' life on earth – just as our Lenten journey is also moving quickly now toward Easter. For the past 5 weeks we have been moving together through Jesus' life and ministry on earth, but now the Easter mystery is nearly upon us. Jesus knew he was about to be betrayed and killed and yet he walked toward Jerusalem to have dinner with his friends - the three people in whose presence he could be a man as well as a Messiah.

You can almost feel what Jesus felt in this. Think about the times in our lives when we have been really busy, or incredibly stressed. All we can imagine is having a meal with our families; being together with loved ones, out of the pressures of life. Perhaps this is what Jesus felt on that day.

The sister of Lazarus

The narrative which follows seems important for us to wrestle with, to learn from – if only to make sense of the series of unconventional events which follow. It is Mary who now takes centre stage; not Lazarus. And she does a few things which simply were not done at that time.

First, she takes about a pint of perfume (worth about 1 years' salary to her) and pours it on Jesus feet. It might at least have been understandable if she had poured it on his head, but even then this was generally only done to coronate kings, or elevate someone with honour, by prophets or priests.

Then, while cradling his feet in her arms (not allowed in Jewish custom either, for a woman to touch a man) she gently wipes his feet with her untied, loose hair (it was also forbidden for a woman to loosen her hair in this way in front of others).

It is really a remarkable image; a depiction of such intentional, burning love in action – it is a bit unsettling really. If we saw such a thing in person, I wonder if it would even make us uncomfortable, if we would divert our eyes at such raw emotion, such pure love.

The question is - what is the message to us here today in this display?

What our text tells us - The love of Mary

A couple of weeks ago our text spoke about the gardener caring for the fig tree – that is, Jesus caring for us, staying with us even when our lives do not bear fruit. Last week Pastor Jeff spoke about the prodigal son whose father represents God and his never-ending love for us, waiting patiently for us.

What our text for today is teaching us is how God orients our *response* to his everlasting love... not as Judas did, with self-serving motives, which only appear noble in the outside...but as Mary did, with unself-conscious, brazen affection and tenderness. If we allow it, this passage may help direct our lives, guide our activities, and define the spirit of our living.

I suppose I have seen something of this sort of tenderness while working in the hospital. When I was working in the Palliative Care ward last summer as a Spiritual Health Therapist I saw many incredible displays of love and tenderness for the dying. On one particular occasion a very old man was dying, lying in a hospital bed; thin, barely breathing. The scene was so striking because his children and his wife were showing him utter tenderness and love – one stroking his forehead, one kissing his wrist, one caressing his feet.

But, of course, this was in a hospital, with a very sick father. It is perhaps not so difficult to conceptualize how to treat each other in times of great trial or sickness, but what about in our everyday lives - what should this look like?

It is a remarkable challenge. You see, Jesus has left the earth in bodily form but lives on in each one of us as the Holy Spirit, the divine indwelling, the councilor. The implication is that we are to respond to each other as Mary responded Jesus. Our challenge is to treat each other and the needs of the world in the same sacred, tender manner as Mary treated Jesus.

Attention

Well, the Christian mystic Simone Weil, who lived in the early 20th century, stated that “attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity.” Perhaps we could begin here, with our full attention; to listen, carefully...to our spouses, our children, our street neighbour, our pew neighbour.

This may sound counter-intuitive, but to *listen*, to give our full attention, is a very difficult thing to do well. It asks of us an interior steadiness where we no longer need to prove ourselves in speeches, arguments, statements, or assertions. In deep listening we no longer feel the inner necessity to make our presence known. We are free to receive, to welcome, to accept. This can be the most generous gift we can offer another person.

We have probably all experienced this. Where we are speaking to someone and suddenly we feel that we can tell them our whole life story. What a relief this experience is. Here is someone who removes the fear. Their listening, their deep attention, helped us feel that we were not alone. We are not alone!

The message of Mary is this: do these little things with great love.

And what if we extended this attention to *ourselves* in this same way, if we attended to our own inner lives in prayer, reflection, gratitude, and acceptance – to accept ourselves for who we are; that is in spite of our weakness, our imperfections.

Activities such as these affirm our connected journeys; our mutual vulnerability – they are the true gateway into the sanctuary of human or divine love...the gift of the presence of God’s in our lives. God saying – “you are not alone – I love you just as you are.”

If we lived this way how might this radical expression of love transform us and our understanding of God?

How might we treat each other differently and the stranger down the street?

How might we treat ourselves in the anguish that has some expression in each of our own lives?

Our Lenten Journey

On our journey of Lent these past few weeks we have been shown that God loved us first, and always. It is unconditional and it is enduring – it is covenantal, irrevocable, and everlastingly.

Amazing! What an assurance this is:

No matter what we do or have done in our lives;

No matter how poorly we may at times feel about ourselves;

No matter what difficulties or traps we have created for ourselves in our lives –

God's forgiveness and love are always right there to claim us as beloved, sacred, holy, his children.

We may truly rest in this assurance; God loves us now and forever, period!

As Pope John Paul II remarked, "Do not abandon yourself in despair. We are Easter people and *hallelujah* is our song."

We are Easter people, forgiven sinners - the victory is already won. Nothing we do can alter the joy of the life's dance of grace that is going on all around us, and through us. Indeed we are in the midst of it and it is in the midst of us. It beats through our very blood whether we want it to or not. That is the grace of God, the unconditional promise that God will never leave us.

Conclusion

Today we see the beautiful response of Mary to the good news that Jesus brought the world; a sort of acknowledgement, a thank you, an alignment for the gift of grace - moving, unself-conscious, and tender.

We are asked to do the same for each other and for the world; to give each other our full attention; to be kind and gentle with each other and ourselves as if we were serving God himself at our dinner table.

We do not have to be saviours of the world. We are simply asked to be authentic human beings, enfolded in weakness and in hope, walking together on our journey toward God.

We are Easter people and *hallelujah* is our song. Amen