

Sermon 2025.04.06 Lent 5

Last week after church several of us found ourselves in a discussion of puritanism – and I can't remember what prompted this conversation. Though I do remember Penne's contribution to the conversation that during the English civil war, the puritans were right but repulsive while the royalists were wrong but romantic. Be that as it may, today's NT readings are actually all about the problems of puritanism – which, in whatever form it takes, is really about encoding everything in rules and regulations. We all have a tendency to this to some extent – it actually makes it easier to decide on what to do in given circumstances: some things are just right and other are just wrong, and we know this because we know the rules. More ominously, it tells us who we should be associating with: people who follow the same rules; people like us.

But listen to what Paul is saying in today's epistle reading. He's saying I've done everything right, all my life: I was even born into the right group – the people of Israel and the tribe of Benjamin (king David's tribe, and going back further the youngest son of Jacob who received special treatment on a number of occasions). And, Paul is saying, I've followed the rules: I've been a Pharisee, and an observant one at that. No one could fault my behaviour, or my way of life.

But then something happened and suddenly I realised that all this rule-following means nothing. That there's something more important than rules. That there is a different sort of righteousness – based on trust, hope, love; on sheer gratitude. The rules are good in themselves, but they're meant to be expressions of these deeper things. The problem is that the rules have a tendency to take over so the deeper things, the attitudes of the heart, we could say, are forgotten in all the strivings of the mind to remember the rules and to be sure that we're following them. At this point the rules take over, and that's why they need to be discarded at times, to see beyond them and beneath them. The rules are the behaviours – they're what everyone sees and admires. A good person, born into the right family and well educated and well behaved. That's what Paul was – until he realised that while it wins him admiration, it cannot save him, no matter how hard he works at it. Because there's this deeper thing, the thing Jesus called the one thing needful. Mind you – Paul tells us, I'm not there yet:

'Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own,'

Why? 'because Christ Jesus has made me his own.' Because of what Christ has done, because of what God has done, in Christ, for him. Not because he's chosen Christ, but because Christ has chosen him, and he has received this choosing. It is what we've received that's the important thing. That's when Paul stopped being a puritan,

we could say, and started acting out of gratitude, in an inner attitude trust, love and hope.

In today's gospel what do we see? The well-known story of Martha doing all the kitchen work behind the scenes, and Mary her sister doing something extravagant and completely useless. Martha is doing her work, important as it is, because she thinks this is her role in life, to do good and to do it in a particular, fairly conventional way. And Mary is criticised for failing to carry out her duties in the way her sister Martha does.

Variations of this story are told in all four gospels: in Lk (7.36ff), it's a Pharisee who accuses Jesus of failing to see that the woman is a sinner. In Matthew (26.6ff.) it is the disciples who express outrage, in Mark – the earliest of the gospels – it is some onlookers who are offended. The woman is anonymous in these three gospels. In every case, though, this takes place not long before Jesus betrayal and death – and that's significant.

It is Judas who accuses Mary in today's Johannine version of the story of being wasteful and frivolous, and he manages to add a very good puritan reason for his accusation: the perfume could've been sold and the proceeds given to the poor. John the narrator rather gratuitously adds that Judas was a thief and wanted to embezzle the money for himself. Interestingly John's reason does nothing to challenge the

underlying problems – that there are still poor people, and rich people who could afford to buy the perfume, and someone has presumably manufactured it and would need to be paid for their efforts.

In any case, Jesus is not interested in shaming Mary for her extravagance or wastefulness – rather he sees her underlying motivation – deep thankfulness for what she has received from Jesus; and all those other things – trust, love, hope, and maybe fear for the path that Jesus seems to be taking. She is acting out of a obscure perception of what is likely to happen in the near future. She can't quite articulate this in words, but she can in action. The rules are irrelevant at this point, and at this level of understanding, what Mary exhibits here is the one thing needful, the one point Jesus has been trying to get across to his disciples the whole time. Mary is the one who gets it, in this story – and gets what Paul is talking about in the epistle. This is the new thing, predicted by Isaiah in today's OT reading, that God is doing in the world. It doesn't abolish the rules; but it sees to the heart of why they are there, and knows instinctively where the rules need to be set aside for something greater. But this is by no means obvious or easy to see.

For us, it's what we've received in our baptism – it's what's been given to us, and all we need to do is our recognition of that, our response to it.

