

Sermon series week 6

This week is week 6 of our Discipleship sermon series. This week the theme is 'making a difference: faith in action'.

We have readings from Isaiah, from the letter of James, and from the gospel of John – three very deep readings, which raise big questions about the link between what we believe and what we do.

In the sermons I've done in this series before, I've encouraged people to look at all three Bible passages for the week again after the service, and think about them and return to them during the course of the week. For the services when we don't have all three readings, it's particularly true that unless you do you won't get a full sense of the theme being explored.

This week I feel is a week when we could easily start to feel anxious. When we hear passages from the Bible that tell us that faith without works is dead, or that we should be sharing our bread with the hungry and bringing the homeless poor into our houses, it's easy to start to feel inadequate, or hypocritical, or helpless, or all sorts of negative things. We don't measure up. We could easily feel like giving up. Or we could go into overdrive and try to do all sorts of things that push us beyond what we can cope with.

But today's gospel gives an interesting slant on this. We know very well that Jesus *did* see his ministry as being to the poor and the sick and the suffering and the enslaved, and that he wanted his disciples to take on that ministry – and that *does* apply to us. But equally, something very different

happens in today's gospel. Mary does something very extravagant, pouring expensive perfume over Jesus' feet. We might well agree with Judas: surely it would have fitted Jesus' own priorities better to spend the money on the poor? But Jesus sees what is really going on, the care and the love and the value in what Mary does. Context and intention and personal calling and response can lead people to do things which maybe don't fit with what we think should be the priorities – but God sees the true heart of the matter.

It's fashionable to do 'three point sermons', so I have three ideas to finish with, which might help us respond positively to this week's theme, instead of being either disabled by anxiety and guilt or damaged by inappropriate striving.

The first is: be realistic. Look realistically at your own lives, and our life as a community – not to feel guilty, but to evaluate properly who we are and what we already do and why. Note that in the middle of 'evaluate' there is the word 'value'. We're all at different stages in faith and in works, but where we are and what we contribute is already of value. If we don't recognise that now, when will we ever nurture and value and encourage each other's contribution? How superhuman do we have to become before we think it counts?

The second point is: be open to change and growth. That doesn't mean an implied criticism that what was there before was wrong. A gardener doesn't look approvingly at a mature plant and think that that means there was something wrong with the plant at an earlier stage. No; but equally a gardener would see it as completely natural and right that

earlier stages of growth lead to later stages, and that life will mean continual response to new conditions.

And the third point is: grow, develop, respond as God intends, for you, for us. Again, a gardener doesn't expect one kind of seed to grow into a different kind of plant in order to be considered mature or useful. In the same way, we shouldn't look at particular examples of mature faith and think that is what we and other people have to become. Growing and mature faith look different in different people.

So there are my three points, which I hope will help. But underlying them I think is an even more useful analogy, about seeing ourselves as plants in God's garden. There's plenty of Biblical precedent for that, of course. What I think it can do is help us see God's grace, and help us learn to trust. God planted us here, God nurtures us, God gives us what we need to become what He wants us to be, and he desires different things from us at different times depending on what kind of plant we are. It's not about our effort; it's about God's grace, about allowing God to nurture us and help us grow and respond in the right way at the right time. If we really trust in that and commit to that, then the plant will quite naturally bear its particular fruit in God's good time.