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Point

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Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:3-14; John 12:1-8

At the heart of today's Gospel story lies the stark reality of death. The triumph of Jesus is a key element of the way in which John presents the story of Jesus, but still embedded are stark reminders of the reality of death, the emotional and physical pain it brings, and the confusion which follows in its wake.

Mary of Bethany, in an expression of love and anticipatory grief, anoints Jesus feet with a lot of expensive nard. Judas complains that this was a waste – the nard could have been sold and given to the poor, a much more useful way to utilize this resource. Mary's action was too extravagant.

Death also rears its head in verses 9 to 11, which in reality form part of the story but are not included in the lectionary reading. In those few verses we hear of the plot by the scribes and Pharisees to kill Lazarus.

His living is evidence of the power of Jesus and gives credence to Jesus' claims. So, as much as they wish to be rid of Jesus, they also wish to be rid of Lazarus.

But the loss which death occasions is also present in Judas. Here is a precursor of the betrayal of Jesus by a friend. Such a betrayal creates a form of death – the death of trust.

In all these ways the pain and reality of death and loss are put before us in this passage. Just as we are to begin to move towards Jerusalem we are reminded of this. We are reminded of it so that in our sense of triumph over the resurrection we may not forget the stark reality which underlies it.

Mary's anointing of Jesus is a symbol of love's triumph over the prospect of death. It reminds us that ultimately what matters in triumphing over forces like death is love and compassion. Judas is representing a dispassionate concern for those who suffer injustice – a legitimate concern, but one held at arm's length. Mary, however, is passionately engaged as she is about to lose someone for whom she cares greatly.

This challenges some of what we hold to be truisms in our understanding of the faith. We often speak of how easy it is to love those close to us, but what is difficult is to love those who are different from us or those whom we find difficult. That is true, but here is an opposite encouragement. It is an encouragement to love those who are close to us, those whom we do love, to pay attention to them as they may not always be with us.

The immediate focus of this passage is the impending death of Jesus and the loss that this will cause for those in his immediate circle of friends. But Jesus commendation of Mary is a commendation of her immediate and personal focus and a reminder to us that our service of God and our commitment to church and work should never come at the expense of those with whom our lives are most closely intertwined.

As Mary of Bethany loved Jesus and grieved in fear at his impending death so we are encouraged to love Jesus passionately and to never forget those close to us for the sake of causes and commitments.