

CHRISM MASS HOMILY 2011

“Call to Radical Discipleship of God’s Extravagant Love”

(Isaiah 61:1-9; Revelations 1:4b-8; Mark 14:1-10)

T.S. Elliot once said that *in a world of fugitives, the person taking the opposite direction will appear to be running away.*

Regardless of what the world may think of us, to be baptized and anointed with chrism means that we are called to take the opposite direction, to be counter-cultural, to follow Jesus as radical disciples of God’s extravagant gesture, God’s extravagant love.

The gospel taken from Mk introduces a radical, almost subversive tone to discipleship. First of all, Jesus was in the house of a leper and at table with a leper, who even has a name, Simon. This situation is inconceivable in the society at that time. The disciples are probably already uncomfortable with this situation.

When the unnamed woman comes in, they are even more uncomfortable. Nard was not just expensive - it was explicitly reserved for royalty. Then the woman *broke* the jar and *poured* the oil on his head. This is an extravagant gesture, a gesture that was very sensuous. The disciples are really upset by this. They murmur to one another and grumble. They are angry, indignant and legalistic. They scold her, even though they are guests.

Part of the scandal was the posture involved. In that hierarchical, stratified society, the level of one’s head was important. The one whose head in a social interaction is higher is in the superior position. Yet Jesus, when he washed the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper, deliberately placed himself below the disciples. That too was an extravagant gesture, trying to communicate to them that the essence of discipleship, of the ministerial priesthood which we celebrate tonight,

and of the gospel, was not titles, privilege or honour, but radical humble loving service.

In this Gospel Jesus focuses entirely on the woman and endorses what she has done. She has done something particularly religious and a beautiful act, very similar to what Malcolm Muggeridge wrote in his book *Something Beautiful for God*. Jesus rebukes the disciples. He tells them that *she has done what she could*. That is a poor translation. The real meaning is that she has done all that she could. She could not have done more, she has risked her reputation.

Jesus accepts her totally. In fact, she has done a priestly act, anointing him for burial. Of all the characters in the New Testament, of all the disciples and apostles, it is an unnamed woman who anoints his head with nard.

Jesus says in a very emphatic way that her act will be remembered, very similar to the command in the Eucharist to *do this in memory of me*. Jesus pointedly says that *wherever the Good News is proclaimed in the whole world* (even here in The Pas, Manitoba), *what she has done will be told in remembrance of her*. This is a very significant statement, one that gives us cause to ponder the role of women in the Church, to say the least.

Ron Rolheiser, in one of his articles, put forward an insight into this Gospel from Thomas Keating who comments that by breaking the alabaster jar of very expensive perfume over the whole body of Jesus and filling the house with that gorgeous scent, the woman seems to have intuited what Jesus was about to do on the cross. What her lavish gesture symbolized was the deepest meaning of Jesus' passion and death. The body of Christ is the jar containing the most precious perfume of all time, namely, the Holy Spirit. It was about to be broken open so that the Holy Spirit could be poured out over the whole of humanity - past, present, and to come - with boundless generosity. Until that body had been broken on the cross, the full extent of the gift of God in Christ and

its transforming possibilities for the human race could not be known or remotely foreseen. Such was the intuition of this unnamed woman.

The second reading returns us to more normal, expected language of discipleship. Jesus who loves us, has redeemed us and sanctified us all. He made us all into a kingdom, priests serving God our Father, through our service to our brothers and sisters.

Fr. Anthony Gittins, a Sulpician priest from Chicago, focused on the theme of discipleship in his retreat to the Western bishops last January. That theme is a fitting one for this celebration of our chrism mass. To be baptized and anointed with this chrism, and especially to be ordained to the ministerial priesthood, is to live a life of radical discipleship.

According to Gittins, *Mathetes*, a disciple, or to make a disciple, occurs 250 times in the NT. A disciple is chosen by Jesus, unlike the rabbis who were chosen by students. Jesus was explicit about this. He points out that we did not choose him. Rather, he chose us to follow him and to have life to the full. A disciple responds to Jesus' initiative and follows Jesus along the way. A disciple is thus open to learning, and to encountering Jesus personally and intimately. A disciple is one who does not have the attitude that he or she knows it all.

Gittins has three stages to discipleship: Encounter/call, Displacement/Disturbance, and Mission/Commissioning. Jesus calls us by name to follow him. Can we let go of control and respond to the initiative of Jesus? There is also a disturbing quality about the urgency of Jesus' call, a shaking of the foundations. Like the precious nard, discipleship is expensive. There is a cost, a sacrifice, a disturbance, as we let God's will get lived out in our lives. And finally our response is our mission, a sharing in the mission of Jesus. We are to witness to what we have heard and learned from Jesus.

What are we to make of all this? Certainly, it should humble us all, and remind us that in no way can we look to ministry and ordination to the

ministerial priesthood in any way but humble, selfless service, devoid of any jostling for position, power, prestige, honour and privilege. That has to be the bottom line from all this radical scriptural teaching.

Paul Fachel shares his experience of seeing disciples in Egypt at a mosque. They were sitting at the feet of the master, oblivious to what was happening around them, with their attention riveted on that master. At another time, he saw another group of students walking with their master, who was instructing them as they walked along. Literally, they were following in the footsteps of the master, which is a meaning of discipleship.

Lillian Yonkers was president of Oblate College in San Antonio, Texas when I took the Ministry to Ministers program in 1991. Our group of priests and sisters who had completed the program were told that she would be coming to our closing banquet. However, the banquet started without her. We were somewhat bemused, wondering why she had not come, when suddenly she appeared out of the kitchen, dressed with an apron. She had come, not as the guest of honour, but as one who would serve our table. We were surprised and delighted, yet also humbled. The president of the college was serving us. What an example of discipleship, truly following the teachings of Jesus.

The Eucharist that we celebrate now, the consecration of these oils, and the renewal of our commitment to serve, as priests and as pastoral ministers, all invite us to incarnate in our lives and ministry the humble attitude and loving compassion of Jesus.

May our celebration tonight truly be an invitation to radical discipleship that we will accept to live out in our ministry and our service to God's people.