

Embrace Change...

... look for what new thing God is doing

A sermon given on the Fifth Sunday of Lent - 6th April 2025, by the Mission Priest, the Revd Eileen Wallis, in Beverley Minster

Isaiah 43:16-21; John 12:1-8

I'd like to ask you a question to begin with: which of you likes change and which of you doesn't? If you like change, put your hand up; who doesn't like change? So, sort of evenly matched there. Who among you is waiting or hoping for a change, or who's had a change enforced on them, sometimes good, sometimes bad? I think sometimes, whether we like change or not depends on how comfortable or happy we are in our current situation.

Now, in our reading from Isaiah, God's people are not in a comfortable situation. They've been captured and trafficked into the foreign land of Babylon, where they were living as exiles and strangers - imagine that. Other prophets around this time like Jeremiah and Ezekiel had been preaching that they were in their current state because of their sin and their rebellion against God. But the prophet known as Isaiah, in this case, the second Isaiah, he spoke a different word. He spoke a word of encouragement to a people who were desperate for change - "*Thus says the Lord*" he says and then he goes on to remind the people of who their God is: he is the God who delivered them from being slaves in Egypt; he is the God who opened the Red Sea before their very eyes and they walked through on dry land; he is the God who, when they had gone over to the other side, closed the sea again and encapsulated all the enemies who were left at the bottom of the sea. Then Isaiah says, in a strange way, "*Do not remember the former things.*" He just told them to remember and then he says, "Do not!" But I think we do need to remember. In order to have hope that things will change, we need to remember how God has worked in the past.

I think about Moses. Moses was very good at remembering, and his way of remembering was to build an altar wherever he had a significant encounter with God and as he looked at the altar he would remember 'God did that in that place in that time; God delivered us out of difficult situations.' And we need to remember - when has God delivered us out of a difficult situation? When has he brought words of encouragement and healing - through other people, perhaps? When has he guided and directed us in our decisions by his Spirit? When you look back over your life, can you see how God has been at work, perhaps quietly in the background? Perhaps you look back and don't even recognise that it is God, or perhaps [you do recognise God at work] more obviously. We've all lived our life story to this point, the point that gets us to Beverley Minster in April 2025. If we think about that phrase 'history' - somebody said to me the other day, history is 'His Story' - we have history, but it's His Story. It's God's story of his grace and kindness working throughout our lives. So [is it right we should] not to remember?

Let's move on to see what Isaiah says next. He goes on to say that God is about to do a new thing. So maybe what he's saying is, don't spend so much time looking back at the past that you miss the new thing that God is about to do. Now, this is a piece of scripture that always really excites me. It says this, "*God says I am about to do a new thing. Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?*" That's really exciting. It's like Isaiah was saying can you not sense that things are

going to change? Tune your hearts to mind and don't miss it by being so focused on the way things are done, the way we've done things, the things that have happened in the past, that we miss what God is about to do now.

We have a story, but this place has a story too, Beverley Minster and it is His Story too. There have been times in this place of great blessing, perhaps even situations where God has delivered his people out of great danger and threat in unlikely ways; perhaps he's spoken words of healing and people have encountered him in this place powerfully. But what is happening now? What is the unexpected new thing that God is doing among his people today? We don't want to miss it. Do we want to be a part of it? Because it is dependent on us all having a part to play - I've spoken to a few people recently who said, 'Can you not sense that the Holy Spirit is doing something new in this place?' And that's really exciting.

Now let's move to the gospel reading to where John describes this intimate event of Mary anointing the feet of Jesus. Now, it's obvious that Mary has sensed the new thing that was happening through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus. How else can we account for her extravagant, generous gift - a pound of pure nard, perfume which was the cost of a year's wages. Imagine that, her pouring it lavishly on the feet of this man, Jesus. Mary is always portrayed as the ideal disciple because she positioned herself so close to Jesus that she could hear and sense what he was saying and doing. She was so grateful to him - not long before her brother Lazarus had been raised from the dead. Her gratitude and love was poured out in her actions. In her generosity, she did not hold anything back. She seemed to sense that this was the right time to do something special for Jesus. It was six days away from the Passover: Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem; he would be crucified within the week. She took her courage in spite of her fears of what others might say, because she knew that Jesus was worth it.

At this point, I want to mention Martha, her sister: she always gets a bad wrap, really, but her gift of hospitality was being used as well - she was serving Jesus in the way that she knew how. We all have different gifts. How do you serve Jesus with yours? Is it hospitality? Is it our time like Mary? Is it our finances? Is it with our service? How generous are we with our gifts? Do we think that Jesus is worth it?

Let's look for a minute at another person mentioned in the scripture, which is Judas. Now imagine the scene: six days before Jesus's crucifixion, they're all sat around listening, eating; they didn't know that he was going to be crucified; then this extravagant, intimate act by this woman; Judas looks on; he is disgusted; in some way, he's outraged - how dare she waste that money; his heart is hardened even more; he could not see that what she did was so symbolic and so prophetic; she anointed his feet for burial; his feet would not have been anointed when he got buried because he died a criminal's death and was put quickly into a tomb. But the generous act of Mary brought out this contempt, and it even hastened, I would imagine, his desire to bring this whole sorry business to an end by his betrayal of Jesus.

So, in this third week of Lent as we approach that last week in the life of Jesus, what might be the invitation of the Holy spirit to us today? We're going to take a moment and just in the silence of our own hearts, we're going to respond in whatever way we think.

Reading Texts

Isaiah 43:16-21

¹⁶ Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, ¹⁷ who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: ¹⁸ Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. ¹⁹ I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. ²⁰ The wild animals will honour me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, ²¹ the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

John 12:1-8

¹ Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ² There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³ Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴ But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵ 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' ⁶ (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) ⁷ Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸ You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'