



***'Transforming
Repentance:
Coming Home
to God.'***

**Readings for the first
five Sundays of Lent**

BACI LENT 2019

'Transforming Repentance: Coming home to God'

Bible Studies for the
first five Sundays of Lent

The ninth Bible Study Resource offered by BACI

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Biblical Association for the Church of Ireland

Lenten Bible Study 2019



‘Transforming Repentance: Coming Home to God.’

Readings for the first
five Sundays of Lent

presented by **Scott Evans** of UCD
and the RevoLectionary team

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INTRODUCTION

‘Transforming Repentance: Coming Home to God.’

AS A CHAPLAIN and former youth worker, one of the most frustrating misconceptions I encounter is that young people today are not interested in the Bible. To the contrary, I have found that young people are fascinated by the Bible — but only when they are invited to participate in the conversation. They may not be captivated by our monologues or lectures but, when they are given the chance to wrestle with the text for themselves, they will consistently surprise us with their insight, wisdom and profundity.

In September 2016, with the help of the Priorities Fund, I started a simple website with a simple goal. It’s called the RevoLectionary and it exists to create a platform for young Irish writers to contribute to the local, national and global dialogue that happens in parishes across the world through the richness and breadth of the lectionary. Each week, one of our writers writes a short reflection on the coming Sunday’s Gospel reading and offers fresh eyes and fresh ideas to the clergy and laity whose responsibility and privilege it is to preach about it to their community. (Find it at www.revolectionary.com)

In 2018, we were delighted to be asked to contribute to the Biblical Association of the Church of Ireland’s Lenten Series. Lent is a transformative season in the liturgical year and we are honoured to have our voices included in such an important resource that will act as a guide and companion to so many.

As a team of writers whose practice is to reflect on the lectionary’s Gospel readings, we began our preparation by looking at the readings for Lent and were immediately faced with a crucial decision. Should we lean into the lectionary’s provocative and challenging emphasis on repentance? Or should we look for something less ‘old-school’ and more ‘of the moment’? We decided to lean in and explore what these passages could teach us in a world where the word ‘repentance’ has passed out of style. After all, how can we faithfully journey through Lent without an understanding of repentance being part of the process?

The Hebrew word for repentance (“teshuvah”) combines two verbs: ‘to return’ and ‘to feel sorrow’. It means to grieve the ways in which we so easily forget who we are, what we were made for and who we are invited home to. It means to come home to the One who is redeeming, rebuilding, restoring and reconciling all things to himself.

When we understand repentance in this way, it is very hard to confine our conversations about it to the academic and the abstract. Even if one could, my work with young adults has taught me that they won’t let

you off the hook so easily. Throughout these studies, you'll find an emphasis on the heart and the inner life which will invite you think, reflect and share deeply. This may not always be comfortable but Lent seldom is. Just remember that you don't have to share anything you don't feel ready to.

As you plan your sessions, here are some guidelines and suggestions for your time together:

- Allow 90 minutes for study, reading, conversation and prayer. These times together are at their best when they have the space and time to develop organically without being rushed.
- Begin with prayer. This can be a set prayer, open prayer or silent prayer but it helps to prepare ourselves by inviting God to continue his work in us through these gatherings.
- Read the passage. It may help to leave some time after the reading for people to give first impressions or ask questions before starting into the study material.
- Read the reflection.
- Before discussing the set questions, make space for participants to share their thoughts, questions and highlights from the reflection.
- Use the set questions once participants have had a chance to share their initial reactions.
- End your time together by praying with and for each other according to what emerges during your conversation.
- Remember, Lent is a journey and the parts we share of ourselves are not limited to one gathering. Take time to follow up with each other about what has happened in the times between your gatherings.

Thanks to BACI Committee for inviting us to be part of their ministry. It is a huge privilege. We are particularly grateful to Ginnie Kennerley for her editing, insight and guidance as we prepared this study.

Finally, a massive thank you to Katie Lynch, Emily Murtagh and Philip King (who contributed to this series) and to Christina Evans, Alex McElwee and Emma Rothwell who are also part of the RevoLectionary team. Every week, you give me the privilege of opening my inbox to read your words and wisdom and share them with the world. I am so grateful to each of you.

Thank you!



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1. TEMPTATION – resisted by ‘coming home’

Katie Lynch

*This week’s gospel reading:
Luke 4:1-13 (NRSV)*

The Temptation of Jesus

4. *Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ² where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. ³ The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” ⁴ Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’” ⁵ Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶ And the devil said to him, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. ⁷ If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” ⁸ Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” ⁹ Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰ for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ ¹¹ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” ¹² Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” ¹³ When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.*

A few thoughts

JESUS’ temptation in the wilderness is a story that implores us to remember who we are. If we see this passage as a display of Jesus’ inability to sin, and our inability to measure up, we do ourselves and the world a great disservice. Rather, if we read it as an invitation to come home to our true selves, we can begin to operate on a divine frequency. Jesus, responds to temptation with a deep-rooted sense of his familial tie with God, who declared at his baptism “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased”. Thus he shows us that he is dependent solely on God, for strength, identity, and life itself.

Repentance is often understood as a turning from sin. Sin is not simply making mistakes; sin is separation from God. Repentance is about remembering who you are and whose you are, coming home to the person God has called you to be.

We are invited to participate in God's redemptive and restorative work in our world. We have the opportunity to tap into the work God is doing, God's mission, even in our world today, where we may feel weary, weak, or prone to despair. God is still working, and constantly searching for those of us paying attention to this mission. Knowing that we can be used by God teaches us what to say *No* to, giving more power to our *Yes*.

God is always chasing the other, the outsider, the lost sheep. The person you were called to be is for the sake of someone else. However, in order to partner with God on this mission, you must tend to your own hunger pangs. The Message version of v.3 says, "the devil, playing on his hunger, gave the first test". In order to ensure we are not hungry, we must remain in God just as Jesus did, remembering that we are all God's children, and that his grace is constantly available to us, equipping us to do all the work he has called us to.

Luke's first readers would have been aware of the parallel between the Israelites' 40 years in the wilderness, and their experience of temptation, and Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness, and the similar testing of his faith and identity. The Israelites continually witnessed God's provision and rescue, yet they were not always faithful to God. Jesus, by contrast, remains steadfast in his faith; secure in the knowledge that he is God's, and that God has called him to something higher. We are similarly called to remain faithful to the cause, knowing all the while that there is grace in abundance, and God is always faithful, even when we fail.

So this Lent season, what should we turn from, in order to pursue the life that God has set in motion for us? In which areas of your life do you need to rely on God's version of events?

For God's sake, for the sake of the world, save your *Yes* for what God has for you. Know who you are. Know whose you are. And partner with the Divine to bring radical love and justice to our world.

Notes

4:1 - The river Jordan was historically, geographically and religiously significant for the nation of Israel as it was where they crossed from the wilderness into the Promised Land. Jesus' journeying into the wilderness and return would have reminded readers of Israel's history and God's faithfulness.

4:2 - 'Where for forty days he was tempted' would have evoked images for Jewish readers of the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness.

4:4, 8, 10-11 - Jesus responds to each temptation by quoting the Torah (the first five books of what we call the Old Testament today). He succeeds where the nation of Israel failed. To dive deeper, explore Deut. 8:3, 6:4-15 and 6:16.

Questions

1. In 4:1-2, Luke writes that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness where he was tempted by the devil. Have you ever felt led into a time of testing? How did it impact your faith?
2. Many writers have reflected on these temptations and on what the equivalent temptation would be in our modern world. Jesus' temptations were to use his power to feed himself, to accept the devil's help to take authority over the nations of the world, and to put God to the test by throwing himself off the pinnacle of the temple, thus gaining a throng of admirers. What three temptations would the devil offer Jesus in a modern version of this story?
3. When tempted, Jesus falls back on his understanding of Scripture and who he is as the Son of God. How do you deal with temptation or hardship? Are there any verses or stories in Scripture that you find helpful, encouraging or empowering during those times?

Prayer

Spend some time in silent prayer asking God for awareness and guidance about what he is inviting you to turn away from or resist during this Lenten season.

Take some time to share these temptations with one another (to the extent that you feel comfortable).

As a group, pray for each other that you may each have a deep and profound understanding of God's love for you and that this knowledge will equip you with self-awareness, strength and perseverance.

2. REPENTANCE – turning towards our death

Philip King

*This week's gospel reading:
Luke 13:31-35 (NRSV)*

The Lament over Jerusalem

13. ³¹ At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to Jesus, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." ³² He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. ³³ Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.' ³⁴ Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! ³⁵ See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

A few thoughts

WHETHER or not the Pharisees have Jesus' best interests at heart, one thing is clear from their words in the text – Jesus is heading for danger, of the fatal kind. Jesus brushes aside any fear of Herod. Instead, he instructs the messengers to tell "that fox," that he is about his Father's business, that of bringing in the Kingdom of God. (In the life and work of Jesus, the in-breaking of the Kingdom is already come, demonstrated in the healing of the sick and the release of the demon-possessed.) However, at no point does Jesus dismiss the threat of death; he only dismisses any fear of Herod.

Here, in Jesus' words, Luke foreshadows his fate, with a subtle allusion to the three days he will spend in the tomb. Jesus as the prophet of God must die, but he will not die outside Jerusalem. The work to be completed lies both in the journey and the destination.

Death awaits Jesus in Jerusalem. In the Lukan narrative, it is no coincidence that Jesus, whose early life was marked by two significant events

at the Temple, as an infant and as a twelve-year-old who stayed behind to quiz the teachers in his Father's house, now sets his sights for this place once more. Jesus returns, one might say, to his spiritual home. He returns there to fulfil the words that Simeon and Anna spoke over him as a child. As he starts on his journey, Jesus laments over the city to which he will return.

He laments because God's people have refused his embrace. In the form of the prophets before him, and now in the life of Jesus, the brood rejects the hen. They have forgotten and scorned their identity and the one who gave it to them in the first place. Will we also reject and turn away from our Mother Hen? Repentance means turning home to the one who has claimed us and sought to cherish us.

The "house", the Temple, remains, but not for long. Jesus will approach it when he enters the city on the donkey to the chant, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord" (Lk. 19:38), the very words quoted here. We must not lose the irony. What at first seems triumph for Jesus will turn quickly to death; yet triumph for his tormentors will lead to the city's destruction. Returning home, for Jesus, means turning to his destiny - the consummation of his whole life, his death.

Jesus returns home to die. His death spells judgment for Jerusalem. The city does not recognise its saviour, so it will be thrown down. (Luke 19.41-44)

Repentance

How does this passage help our understanding of repentance? In Jesus' own words, to go after him means to take up his cross and follow him. (Lk.9.23) To repent, if it is to return home to God (Lk.15 – 11 ff) in a sense means walking towards our death. As they do the work of the Kingdom, proclaiming the good news to the world, Jesus' disciples walk towards an end greater than themselves. And our repentance, our turning from worldly lures and anxieties back to God, means walking towards our bodily death, knowing that our eternal being lies in God. Repentance means dying to the self. It means walking towards the fulfilment of God's Kingdom, which can mean dying like a prophet.

May we be those who find ourselves under the wings of God, nurtured by His love in this world and the next. May we, like Jesus, turn our face willingly to the place of death, so that the work of the Kingdom may be completed.

Notes

13:31 - The 'Herod' referred to here by the Pharisees is Herod Antipas who was the 'tetrarch' or ruler of Galilee and Perea and the son of Herod the Great who tried to have Jesus killed in Bethlehem while he was still an infant (Mt. 2:16-18).

13.32 - Exorcism and healing are specifically Messianic signs in Jewish tradition.

13:34 - As the cultural and religious centre of the Jewish people, Jerusalem had developed a reputation as an unsafe place for those who brought divine messages of challenge and change (cf. Matt. 23:33-39)

13:35 - "Your house is left to you". Luke is writing after 70CE when the Temple was razed by the Romans, so his first readers are aware that it will not remain standing. See also Luke 19:43, where Jesus foretells the destruction of the Temple, linking this with the refusal of God's people to recognise "the things that make for peace".

Questions

1. Jesus describes himself as longing to gather his people "as a hen gathers her brood under her wings", but they were not willing. In what ways are we unwilling to be embraced by God's love and calling?
2. When Jesus describes himself as a mother hen, he is using language that may be unfamiliar to some. How does this image compare to the pictures that you have in your head of who Jesus is and what he is like?
3. "Repentance means turning home to the one who has claimed us and sought to cherish us." What connotations does the word repentance have for you? In what ways have you heard it used? Has it been helpful or harmful?
4. What does it mean to 'take up your cross' or 'die to yourself' as part of following Jesus? What does this look like for us as individuals and communities?

Prayer

Spend a few minutes in silence reflecting on the idea of Jesus being like the Mother Hen who longs to gather her brood under her wings.

Ask God to help you see ways in which you might 'die to yourself'.

Pray for the courage to be able to embrace his challenging invitation to take up our cross as we build his Kingdom.

3. FROM ROOTS TO FRUITS – the barren fig tree

Scott Evans

*This week's gospel reading:
Luke 13:6-9 (NRSV)*

The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree

13. ⁶ Then Jesus told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷ So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' ⁸ He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. ⁹ If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

A few thoughts

IF JESUS' parables were songs, I don't think that the parable of the barren fig tree would have made it in onto his 'Greatest Hits' compilation. Its tone and trajectory often make people uncomfortable. Reading it through Western eyes in the twenty-first century, in particular, makes it ripe for misinterpretation. It's hard to look past our first impression — that this is a story about a man who is angry at a tree.

But it's so much more than that.

To begin with, fig trees were often used as a symbol of the nation of Israel, just as poets might write of a shamrock to represent Ireland or a rose to represent England. So Jesus' audience would not have had to dig deep to figure out what he was talking about. This is a parable about his people, their purpose and their potential. The vineyard owner represents God, the gardener represents Jesus, and the three years of barrenness can be taken to refer to the three years between Jesus' baptism and his death. So the time for fruitfulness is getting short!

While one might get the impression that the vineyard owner is obsessed with efficiency and productivity, if he were, he would not have planted a fig tree in a vineyard in the first place. Fig trees have big branches

and deep roots that require space and nourishment. The owner wants the fig tree to be there. He creates space for it and wants it to flourish, just as he wants that for us.

But his frustration is well-founded. Year after year he has returned to the fig tree only to find that this deeply rooted tree that draws sustenance, water and nutrients from his ground uses all this energy and yet never turns it into anything that might nourish others - however much the gardener cares for it.

When we understand the world in which Jesus was speaking, what seems like an unreasonable outburst from a disgruntled landowner becomes a dynamic conversation between the one who owns the land and the one who tends to it about how to remedy the imbalance between what the tree absorbs and what it has the capacity to produce. It's a conversation that I sometimes wonder whether God the Father and Jesus might have about me — and perhaps about all of us.

It can be so easy to focus on where we are planted and to define ourselves by the places in which our roots find sustenance — roots like my socio-economic background, my family, my educational opportunities and my supporting community. Repentance invites us to shift our focus from what we consume and where we are planted to what we produce and where we are called. When Jesus told this parable, he was looking around at the Jewish people and inviting them to return to their original blessing and calling. God promised Abraham to make his descendants a blessing to all nations. They were not blessed to the exclusion of the rest of the world but *for the sake* of the world. And so are we.

Notes

13:6 - The fig tree is the third tree to be mentioned in the Bible. The first two are the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden. Once Adam and Eve have eaten from the tree of knowledge, they see their nakedness and cover themselves with fig leaves. (Genesis 3)

13:7-9 - The conversation between the landowner and the gardener mirrors God's conversation with Moses after Israel had turned away from God and worshipped the golden calf in Exodus 32. Taking these two passages together, we can see Jesus as the gardener and like a new Moses, interceding on behalf of the people and revealing his patience, grace and mercy.

Questions

1. What was your first reaction when reading this story? How did you feel about the landowner's attitude to the fig tree? What about the gardener's response?
2. Do you think you experience an imbalance between what you receive from God and what you give to the world? In what ways are you challenged to examine what your life produces?
3. In what ways do we as churches and people of faith receive sustenance, energy or resources that don't become a blessing to the world around us?
4. In light of this challenging passage, what could repentance look like for you?
5. What practical resolutions could you make this Lent to share the ways in which you have been blessed with your community?

Prayer

Spend a few minutes in silence reflecting on all the things that you have been given that you feel grateful for.

Thank God for all that you have received and for all the ways in which he has been active in your life.

Pray that God would give you the compassion and desire to share your blessings with others. Ask for him to guide you and your community to bear fruit in a way that reveals his love, goodness and care for the world.

4. COMING HOME – Prodigal Son

Emily Murtagh

This week's gospel reading:
Luke 15:11-32 (NRSV)

The Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother

15. ¹¹ Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. ¹³ A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴ When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶ He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'"

²⁰ So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹ Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²² But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

²⁵ "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷ He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' ²⁸ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never

disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' 31 Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

A few thoughts

TECHNOLOGY has almost killed the art of getting lost. Almost all of us have a map of the whole world in minute detail sitting in our pocket. Our phones set our path to home and this passage is all about home, journeys away and how we find our way back.

Where is home for you? We travel more than ever, have seen more cities, met more people. We are always on the move, always learning, going, absorbing, it is the rhythm of our life, and it is hectic. Where is home through all those experiences? Wherever you go in the world, where is the place that you know has happy hormones coming through the floorboards, where you can rest, where you are known, loved, and safe? Where is the place your heart returns to easily, without the need to switch on your GPS?

The son in this passage takes his inheritance, leaves his Father's house and goes in search of fulfilment. Henri Nouwen wrote, "leaving home is living as though I do not yet have a home and must look far and wide to find one," and "leaving home is looking for unconditional love where it cannot be found."

The son looks for it in all the usual things we use to escape from ourselves, that distract us from aligning ourselves with who we truly are; okay parties, average friendships, relationships that have no future.

The other son also has not made peace with himself and with the Father. He is lost, in his own back garden, resentment holding him back from knowing where he was and who he has always been.

Unconditional love hits hard in this passage. No one's core identity changes throughout the story, just the fear, regret and bitterness that held them back from being in harmony with it. Home was always home. The son was always the son, always loved, at the parties, and at the pig farm. The older son was always just as loved; but caught on his own home territory in a web of bitterness. The Father was always the Father, waiting.

Nouwen went on to write that “home is the centre of my being, where I can hear the voice that says, ‘You are my beloved. On you my favour rests’”. There is a tangible sense of relief when you feel the embrace of the Father as he takes his son home.

“Return to your rest, my soul, because the Lord has been good to you.”

Today is a good day to go home. Repentance is the movement, the 180 degree turn towards home; it realigns our posture to where our soul finds rest, where the Father is always waiting. Your identity has never changed, you have been given a spirit of sonship, and by it we cry ‘Abba Father’.

Notes

15:15 - While pigs and pork are not problematic for Christians in the twenty-first century, the Torah prohibitions against eating pork and touching pig carcasses would have made Jesus’ audience cringe in discomfort at the idea of the younger son feeding pigs and tending to them.

15:20 - Running would have been considered undignified for a wealthy landowner in Jesus’ time. The act of running to embrace his son shows his lack of concern for how he would be perceived in comparison to his desire to embrace his son and welcome him home.

15:22 - The sandals, ring and robe that the father gives the son were all symbols of being a son rather than a servant. These gifts are a refuting of the son’s request to redefine their relationship on his return, and a visual representation of his redemption.

Questions

1. Which character in the story do you most identify with?
2. Do you ever feel “still a long way off?”
3. Where and who is home for you? Imagine the place that is most home for you. What does it feel like? What does it look like? What does it feel like to be called home?
4. What is God calling you home to? What is he saying?
5. Is there a lie about God, or about yourself, that is keeping you from coming home?

Prayer

Take a few minutes in silence to ask yourself two questions:

When I pray, do I pray like a child of God or like a servant?

When I pray, do I pray like someone who is at home or someone who is still far off?

Spend some time praying for each other based on your answers to the discussion questions.

Conclude by praying together:

***Father, thank you that you are always waiting;
you see us when we are still a long way off.***

Thank you that you call us your children and you love us.

***Thank you for that unconditional love
that gives us our true immovable home.***

Let us return to it, live in it, and be at rest there. Amen.

5. ALL MY LOVE – Mary anoints Jesus feet

Emily Murtagh

*This week's gospel reading:
John 12:1-8 (NRSV)*

Mary Anoints Jesus

12. *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."*

A few thoughts

FOR THE YEAR after I finished college, I worked in a florist. One of my jobs there was to take orders over the phone. Mostly I talked to men one or two days before (or on the morning of) birthdays, anniversaries, Valentine's Day. My favourite part was when I got to ask them what they wanted to write on the card. A moment of real vulnerability occurred each time, where they suddenly realised that they should have ordered online, where they could have typed away to their heart's content. Some of them stuttered, but for some of them it flowed out easily. It only had to be short and sweet; the cards were only small.

There was one closing line that got me every time;

Dear Bernie, Happy birthday, all my love, Frank.

Dear Linda, I am so, so sorry. All my love, John.

All my love. All my love was a more frequent a sign-off than I expected, three big words rolled off tongues of big men who weren't afraid. And it would hit me straight under the ribcage every time. All their love, held safe in a bunch of flowers, that would live for a week and then die. The love alive before it, and maybe more so after it.

All her love.

Mary, in this passage, pours out, in courageous extravagance, all her love.

Mary knew Jesus. She sat at his feet and learned. (Luke 10:39)

She fell at his feet and surrendered. (John 11:32)

Now she anoints his feet and honours him.

All of her love because of all of his.

People who sign off "all my love" easily, and pour out great perfume, to the last drop, have been caught in something like loving and being loved, and have found enough safety within it to be this vulnerable. They have found enough fuel there to risk being wholehearted.

All of our love is the best kind of paradox, because like good flower-buying men in Scotland, people who come with all of their love, tend to mysteriously have plenty of love left, for kids, grandkids, neighbours, friends, strangers rich and poor. Jesus is clear throughout the gospels on how we are to treat others, especially those who are more vulnerable or marginalized. Judas' words here rather represent a heart still afraid to listen, to surrender, and to honour. I might not have been as cutting, might have suggested a compromise, like pour out half the perfume, sell half for the poor, but repentance never really looked like that either.

All of her love because of all of his.

It is the ultimate statement of trust and vulnerability to hold nothing back, and this is what repentance is. It acknowledges past pain and future pain; that which is inflicted on us and that which we cause to others. It acknowledges love; the love we have been given, and the love that we can give. Mary knew Jesus would die. This was not ordinary perfume, but the kind used to anoint the dead. Men called the shop to buy funeral flowers, apology flowers too. Was it easier or harder on those days to say "all of my love"? Pain and love mingle in space and time.

Richard Rohr wrote that all spirituality is what we do with our pain. I would add it is also what we do with our love. In repentance, we pour them out – both our love and our pain – at the feet of Jesus.

All of our pain because of all of his.

All of our love because of all of his.

Notes

12:5 - A denarius was a silver coin that was worth approximately one day's wages. Three hundred denarii, then, was worth around ten months wages

Questions

1. Which person do you most identify with in the story? Why is this?
2. Is there an aspect of your life that God is asking you to be more wholehearted in? Does this feel scary?
3. Is there a gift that God is asking you to give to someone?
4. Is there pain in your life, that you have caused or have had inflicted on you that you need to pour out?

Prayer

Spend some time asking God what it would mean for you to give him both your love and your pain.

If you feel comfortable with it, share with and pray for each other about anything that comes up.

Conclude by saying this prayer together:

Lord, thank you for all your love.

Thank you that we can trust you,

and that trust is the foundation for vulnerability,

for worship and for love.

Lord show us where there is love we need to pour out,

the direction our whole hearts need to be turned towards.

Lord show us where there is pain we have not dealt with,

that we have caused or that we are hurting from. Amen.

*Blessed Lord
who caused all holy scriptures to be written
for our learning:
Help us to hear them,
to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them,
that through patience and the comfort
of your holy word,
we may embrace and for ever hold fast
the blessed hope of everlasting life,
which you have given us in our Saviour
Jesus Christ.*

Book of Common Prayer

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Katie is an aspiring writer, adventure-seeker, and conversation enthusiast who wishes she could be paid to drink tea and write about life's big questions all day.

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