

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως  
Lent 5-C; 7 April 2019  
St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster

## In Perspective

*In nomine...*

### I. Intro

This Lent we have been talking about repentance. We have been talking about how repentance is less about living up to some standard of behavior, a list of do's and don'ts, and it's more about gaining a new perspective on life. A Kingdom of God perspective. This is the perspective that, as our collect puts it, loves what God commands and desires what God promises. It's a perspective that gives us stability in the midst of the swift and varied changes of the world, fixing our hearts where true joys are to be found.

As we enter these final two weeks of our Lenten practice, it is to the heart of things that our Scripture readings today bring us.

### II. Thesis

The prophet Isaiah admonishes us,  
*Do not remember the former things,  
or consider the things of old.*

*I am about to do a new thing;  
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? (Isa 43.18–19a NRSV)*

Isaiah is writing with reference to the Exodus, that defining moment of Israel's history. The Exodus was for the Israelites as the Resurrection is for Christians. It is the ultimate expression of God's love, God's solidarity, God's liberation for God's people. It is that specific moment in time when something fundamental changed about the world. And, says God, *fuhgeddaboudit!* God says, I'm working on something better! Something that is as beyond comprehension as rivers in the wastelands and plentiful, potable water in the deserts. It's time to shift your

perspective away from the past. What I did back there, says God, was only a foretaste, a preview, a deposit or a down-payment. It was a promise of something even better that is to come. Put your hope not in nostalgia for “once upon a time,” but in expectation for what that “once upon a time” tells you about what God is still working out in the future!

Likewise, Paul writes about the change of perspective *he* has undergone. With all the advantages of family name, education, and conventional status, Paul had it made. Paul lived among a religious community, a community with a perspective that valued religious observance above all else. These were people who were serious about encountering God, and Paul had checked all the boxes. He was at the top.

But when Paul encountered the living Jesus, what did he do? He responded to Isaiah’s message, considering all that was so good and honored and earnest in his past as rubbish. Loss, he calls it *three times* in two verses. It’s not that he regretted any of it, but that compared to what God was doing in his life? Fuhgeddaboutit! All that which he had achieved on his own was worth nothing, by comparison. Paul’s perspective has shifted from “intensely competitive religious achiever” to “recipient of grace freely given.”

### **III. Good News**

This is the story we read about in the Gospel today, as well. Our Gospel writer lays out a stark contrast of perspectives. There was the perspective of Lazarus, Martha, and Mary. And the perspective of Judas.

First, Judas. What Judas says makes sense. Why *didn’t* they sell that perfume and give to the poor? Mary’s action is shockingly extravagant. Cash like that, nearly a year’s wages, could help a lot of people in need. On the face of it, Judas’ words are entirely understandable. As you read the Gospel of John, it’s obvious the Gospel writer has a major chip on his shoulder about Judas, mentioning the betrayal and calling him a thief. But as an outside observer, I have to say that I don’t find anything wrong or inappropriate about what Judas is saying – from a certain point of view.

Then we have Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead, and his sisters Martha and Mary. These three host a formal dinner party in honor of Jesus. They pull out all the stops, and we

might be forgiven for thinking they're doing so in order to thank Jesus for bringing Lazarus back to life. But Mary, always the emotive one, shows us what is really going on. As John tells us, within the week Jesus will be facing his passion: he will be tortured and killed.

Can you imagine the tension, the apprehension, the misgivings Jesus is facing? I have a hard time imagining walking into a hospital and inviting the surgeon to do some necessary task. With the promise of anesthesia! Jesus faced something worse, something intentional, and something that, from every rational perspective, would end only in death. It made no sense! He faced bodily pain and an existential end without any purpose

But Lazarus, Martha, and Mary knew something else about Jesus. They had a different perspective: a Kingdom of God perspective. They knew from personal experience that Jesus was the Messiah and worthy of worship. Extravagant worship. A year's wages poured out on his feet kind of worship. They may not have understood what Jesus's imminent death was all about, but they believed that death was not, in the end, an obstacle for Jesus.

Judas was acting from a conventional point of view, one in which Jesus was another rabbi, maybe even a pretty amazing one. But Mary was worshiping God in the flesh who also happened to be her friend. And she was encouraging Jesus, supporting her friend as he faced up to an unpleasant task he was determined to accomplish.

#### **IV. Invitation**

The work of Lent is repentance, a change in perspective. The work of Lent is to learn to look first of all at the Kingdom of God, and to see the world around us always and only through that lens. In doing so, we will learn to love Jesus and, like Mary and Martha and Lazarus, participate with and even enable Jesus' work around us. We do this by loving, caring for, nurturing the people around us

Jesus' friends threw him a party, spent their life-savings on perfume for his feet. They did everything they knew to show Jesus their love for him. This is what one does when one encounters the divine. And not just the divine. How many of you, parents, have poured out yourselves, time and emotion and money, to care for your children and to try to give them a good starting place in life? How many of you, spouses or partners, have poured out yourself for

the well-being of your chosen companion? How many of you, children, have cared for your parents in their crises, maybe even invited them to live with you and be cared for by you in their old age? How many of you, friends, have cared for a friend who endured some tragedy, standing with them, consoling, sometimes even pitching in to help them recover from whatever has happened? How many of you, 12-step sponsors, have given of your heart and your time to help another on the difficult road of recovery? How many of us give money for the use of the church, spend the night in the Parish Hall for Family Promise, or use most of a Saturday to distribute food at Kitchen of Hope?

We don't do these things because that's how we get ahead in life. These aren't the rational responses of a disinterested participant in the processes of capitalism. We do these things because we have a perspective that is bigger than the material, greater than our own self-interest. We do them because we, too, have had glimpses of the Kingdom of God and because we have seen a little glimmer of Christ living in our children, our parents, our partners, and in friends and strangers. We have remembered that every living person bears in themselves the image of God and is to be honored accordingly.

A Kingdom-of-God perspective results in Kingdom-of-God actions. And those actions can be a little inscrutable to those who don't share the same perspective. But that doesn't make those actions less important or less life-giving. It just means that we have learned a little about repentance, about changing our perspective. And God has moved in our hearts as a result.

*Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found...* (Collect for Lent 5)

Amen.

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