

SERMON: 7 April 2019 – Rev Alistair Cowper

**“The Infinite Generosity of God in Christ”
(Isaiah 43:16-21 and John 12:1-8)**

‘Forget the former things;
do not dwell on the past.
See, I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
I am making a way in the wilderness
and streams in the wasteland.
to give drink to my people, my chosen,
the people I formed for myself
that they may proclaim my praise.

You’ve got to love the poetry of Isaiah. And we need to read it for what it is ... poetry. But just because it’s poetry doesn’t mean it’s all pie in the sky. This is prophetic poetry rooted in the words and actions of God, words and actions which over time are proved to be true, time and time again.

These words were no exception. The Lord did indeed prove himself to be the Redeemer in rescuing his people from Babylonian captivity, just as he had done in taking Israel out of slavery in Egypt, making a way through the sea.

But here the poem tells us that the Lord is going to do a new thing. Israel was to forget the former things. Just because the Lord’s salvation looked like that in the past didn’t mean it would always be like that.

Life is a series of letting go of old ways and embracing new things, or dying to old things and rising to new ways. Letting go of material gain, self importance and the urge to dominate others.

Instead the Lord has new things in mind for his people.

Well we can read these verses in Isaiah with the benefit of hindsight. And we can find parallels with other Prophets and other Scriptures, like Jeremiah’s promise of a time coming when the words of the Lord would be contained in new hearts and new minds.

And we can see that the work of Christ in Jesus was a new thing that shook the certainties that people had about who God was and how God acts.

A Saviour that laid down his life for his friends was not a very popular salvation idea among the nations. Even today, self-sacrifice doesn't make it onto the list of the seven secrets to a successful life.

But in so many ways, Christ is the new thing that God intended. Life in Christ is the new way.

And the poetry of Isaiah captures something of that new life as a pathway through the wilderness and a river in a dry wasteland.

And one of the marks of this flowing, abundant life in Christ is generosity.

The story of Jesus being anointed by Mary shows us a great example of generosity. Mary had reason to want to pour out her life into her Saviour's arms and kneel at his feet. She had seen Jesus raise her brother Lazarus from the dead. The brother she'd lost was alive again.

Remember, that according to John, it was the raising of Lazarus that was the final straw for the teachers of the Law. When that happened they decided it was time to plot to have Jesus killed. So Jesus would have had every reason to stay out of the way for fear of his life. But he doesn't do that. He turns up again at their home in Bethany.

And Mary takes expensive perfume, (the word in Greek is myrrh, as in frankincense, gold and myrrh, associated with preparing a dead body for burial, so Mary has kept this myrrh for the right time and is giving Jesus a sign that his burial is near, its perhaps her last sacred act she can do for her Lord

(like the story of the carer washing the body of the person who'd just died being a sacred moment of privilege)),

and pours it on her master's feet and the atmosphere of the whole house is affected by the aroma.

Her generosity has a direct effect on the atmosphere.

Its a staggering amount of money to "waste" on Jesus. It cost 300 denarii, a year's wages, let's say £25,000 at least in today's money.

Who of us is at the point that we'd give £25,000 (if we had it) to such a cause?

The world would say that was not a wise use of money.

But the Scriptures from of old tell us that a person is a fool to store up earthly wealth but not have a rich relationship with God. Jesus quoted that in his conversation with the rich fool (Luke 12:21).

Psalm 112:5 - Good will come to those who are **generous** and lend freely, who conduct their affairs with justice.

2 Corinthians 9:6 - whoever sows **generously** will also reap **generously**

Generosity can help to change atmospheres by bringing a different aroma to the proceedings.

And, of course, the contrary is also true. There's often a Judas around whose voice is heard to say that money would have been better spent on the poor, not that the Judas cares about the poor.

Mean-ness can also change the atmosphere. You can smell it too. It has a bitter stench. And although I believe most followers of Jesus seek to be generous, I've heard that voice before in the church and it can quench the work of the Spirit.

I'm glad we're not like that here.

I'm glad the infinite generosity of our God can swallow up all mean-ness.

I wonder what situations might be changed by generosity, whether our own or someone else's. Remember that in the story Jesus is the recipient of Mary's generous act, he's being blessed by her generosity. There are times when we need to receive the generosity of others and receive it as a blessing to us. We mustn't always read the Scriptures and come away thinking we need to do more or give more, although there will be times when that's appropriate. T

We might not have £25,000 to spend but we each have talents. And we all have the same number of hours in a day. We can employ our gifts and our time generously in acts of worship to honour Christ. We can be the generous hands and feet of Christ whose generosity is infinite. We can choose to be generous with our words. A kind word goes a long way to healing relationships or making them stronger. We can honour people and encourage people with the right word.

You have it in you to make a difference in this world. Christ is in you. Christ in you is the new thing the prophets spoke about. Christ is a generous flow of love

coursing through you. Christ is a self emptying force of blessing pulsing inside you, a well springing up from within, causing ordinary people to do extraordinary things, extravagant things, abundant things.

So let's learn from Mary's extravagant act and keep on letting that infinite generous love of Christ flow freely within us and out from us this week and always.