

JESUS' FACEBOOK FRIENDS

About two weeks ago I did something very surprising.
I did something nobody thought I would ever do - including me!
I joined Facebook....

I know nearly the whole world is on Facebook, but I've always said I would steer clear of it. Even though stuff comes up on Facebook that you won't find anywhere else, and people can be discussing you at length or inviting you to some event that otherwise you won't find out about. I always said I didn't need another reason to be on the internet.

On the other hand, as a congregation we now have our own Facebook page so it might seem a bit daft for the minister not to be on it, especially as its possible to get conversations going through that medium.

Anyway, one of the things about Facebook is it's a way of bringing together contacts and keeping in touch with people's news. And every contact you have is called a "friend".

Within about 2 hours of me joining I had something like 95 friends! It was a bit bewildering and scary! I was getting all these messages from people asking to be my friend!

And so to the question that is often asked: *are your Facebook friends really friends?*

I've got some people who have requested to be friends and I don't even know who they are! So they clearly aren't friends!

But that's an exception.

What your Facebook friends are, (for the most part), are people who know you - for one reason or another.

But just because you know someone doesn't mean you are that person's friend in any meaningful way.

Imagine Jesus lived in the time of Facebook!

Imagine the 'friends' that he would accumulate - those who loved him, those who were suspicious of him and wanted to know what he was doing next.

There would be those hungry for the latest gossip of some kind of miracle or event,

there would be those waiting to see if he taught something they could charge him with blasphemy on,

there would be those waiting to see if he went too far in his criticism of the Roman authorities,

there would be those wanting to catch up on his latest teaching,

and those trying to work out his movements to see if Jesus was coming near to their town.

If Jesus lived in the time of Facebook there would be no shortage of people wanting to join up with him, but they wouldn't all be friends in the true sense.

So here's the question? What *did* Jesus do for friends? *Real* friends...

Reading between the lines, it seemed like even his family weren't on the same page.

They didn't always agree with him or what he was doing. There were even occasions when they seemed ready to try and stop him from doing the work he was called to.

Then there were his followers. Can followers be friends?

Maybe to some small extent - and yet even the best of these followers seemed unable to grasp what Jesus' mission was all about, and even the best would soon be deserting Jesus in his hour of need.

It's a lonely life if you don't have friends...

We wish the Bible told us stuff like: who was the buddy that Jesus grew up with? Who was his best mate?

Or who was the girl that Jesus took to the school dance?

Well here is one thing we *do* know from the Bible, and its important for us to know this because it helps make sense of today's Bible reading.

This man Lazarus, and his two sisters; Mary and Martha, were all big pals of Jesus.

All three.

We don't know how that came to be - but we do know that it was the case.

Their house in Bethany on the outskirts of Jerusalem is where the reading is set, and Jesus is staying there in order to be near his good friends and have a break from the demands of the needs of people around him.

The end of his mission draws near. He's on his way to Jerusalem.

He's about to face his most difficult challenge.

The storm clouds are gathering overhead. And so he goes to be with people he loves - people with whom he can be himself.

But privacy isn't easy for someone like Jesus.

It was something he always had to fight hard for - going away by himself at night or in the early morning to just get a break.

He's here in the home of his good friends, but the more or less ever-present band of disciples are there too.

So even as Jesus hopes for a break the disciples are still with him, looking and listening in and watching all that is happening - witnessing what is going on.

And one thing that happens is very strange indeed.

“Then Mary took a whole pint of a very expensive perfume made of pure nard, poured it on Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The sweet smell of the perfume filled the whole house.”

Everything about this incident is strange.
 We've got a pint of very expensive perfume and Mary uses it all!
 She empties it all out onto Jesus' feet!
 She wipes Jesus' feet with her hair!

Why would she do that?

Imagine using all of the perfume at the one moment!!?
 Imagine wiping and drying Jesus' feet with her hair!!?
 That would mean in the first place Mary untying her hair and letting it fall down.
 Not a strange action in our minds maybe, but in those days women did not let their hair down in the company of others – it would have been considered a very intimate action.
 It's all very extravagant...

Then imagine pouring the perfume onto Jesus' feet!!?
 People were anointed by oil poured onto their head – that was a sign of kingship.
 Anointing of feet was a sign of death and burial.

So the disciples speak up. If you look at this story in other gospels, the disciples are all scandalized by Mary's actions, although in today's description, it is just Judas Iscariot that speaks out, and of course the writer of John is quick to point out that he was a thief and not to be trusted.

But lets just take what Judas says at face value. Is this not a reasonable point?

“Why wasn't this perfume sold for three hundred silver coins^[a] and the money given to the poor?”

Instead of wasting all that perfume in one go, why couldn't it have been sold?
 Couldn't the money then be used for helping people in need? Think how much good could have been done for the poor with the proceeds?

Then there's Jesus' very unexpected reply.
“Ach, there will always be poor people. You won't always have me!”
 What kind of way is that for Jesus to talk....?

But wait a minute. Where does Judas get this concern for the poor?
 From Jesus, of course.
 It is Jesus who cares about the poor.
 It is Jesus who says that the gospel is about bringing good news to the poor.
 It is Jesus who spends his whole ministry caring for and supporting the poor.
 It is Jesus who demonstrates and proclaims that God has a special concern for the poorest and most vulnerable.

So when Jesus says *"You will always have poor people with you. You will not always have me,"* he's not changing his tune or modifying his concern.

He is acutely aware that his earthly life is about to be violently ended, and that the events of the next few days will be world-shattering for rich and poor alike. Mary in her actions is pointing all the watchers towards the inevitable fact of his execution, which not even his closest disciples seem to be expecting.

Mary's action is not just an act of love and devotion. It's a visual parable of preparing Jesus for his death.

She is not anointing him as king. She is preparing him for his death.

In Mark's version of this story Jesus said, *"She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body to prepare it ahead of time for burial."* (Mark 14:8)

Mary gives the best of what she had to Jesus.

Mary did what she could.

And in this season of Lent we are challenged do what we can – we are challenged to offer to God the best of what we are and what we have.

"She did what she could," said Jesus.

*And that's what we must do in our Lent practices. We do what **we** can.*

Mary's anointing didn't save Jesus from his tragic fate. Nor will our Lent practices solve our every problem. But with Mary we do what we can.

We give our old selves to God without restraint, all that we have and all that we are. In return, we trust God for a new self - shaped by God's unlimited love.

And 'unlimited' is the word to describe God's love.

Last week Graeme Stewart was talking about some things that were happening around him.

Redundancies at his work mean that he and others have to reapply for their own jobs. They have had to try to justify their inclusion on the team.

His brother was being reassessed for disability benefits and having to prove his difficulties to a sceptical team of people.

He talked about a gardener who lost a leg in an accident who was told that he wasn't disabled enough.

And an asylum seeker who was asked totally intrusive and embarrassing questions to justify his claim despite the marks of torture being visible on his body.

What's the common denominator in this need to justify? Scarcity.

There are not enough jobs to go round.

There is not enough in the budget to give people disability allowances.

There is not enough space to allow a welcome to asylum seekers.

There's not enough.....

Scarcity.

But with God that just isn't true.
God's love is not limited.
God's gifts are not limited.
God's resources are not limited.

Jesus is about to give up his life for God's sake only to find at Easter that it is presented back to him.

God's love is not limited.
The life that God gives to us is not limited.
God always has more to offer us.
God always has more to give.

And we are called to show that we believe that
and that we belong to this God of abundance.

Mary shows us the way. *"She did what she could."*
In response to God's infinite goodness to us,
we too should offer our unbounded gratitude.

John 12:1-8
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