

“See, I am doing a new thing!” a sermon preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Jordan Redding on 3 April 2022.

I.

We hear on the lips of Judas this morning, a common accusation levelled against the church. In a world of so much need, is it not a gross betrayal of the church’s mission to hoard such wealth for itself? Think of the cavernous basilicas and cathedrals of Europe. Or the mega-church auditoriums in the States. Private jets for Pentecostal pastors and ornate statues and gilded rooms of the Vatican.

In decrying the corruption in the Roman Catholic Church at the time, the early Reformers sought to do away with such extravagance. Presbyterian churches in particular are known for their spartan aesthetic simplicity. And yet, Knox Church isn’t particularly simple. Our organ, our stained glass windows, the stonework – these are works of beauty, that witness to the transcendent glory of God. It cost a lot to construct and continue to cost a lot to maintain.

Judas’ accusation towards Mary is a good one: *this perfume could have been sold and given to the poor*. It’s an uncomfortable accusation that confronts us inescapably with our own wealth which we dedicated as an act of worship over the years.

The last week or two, a story has been doing the rounds on social media of a church in Tauranga that has gifted its church land back to the local hapū. In an interview, the pastor said, “this doesn’t make sense for us financially as a church.” But they did it because the church land originally belonged to mana whenua and it was gifted to the church as an invitation to the missionary society at the time. During the land wars the church ended up siding with the Crown rather than mana whenua, from whom their land had been given. After the wars, the church actually ended up giving the land back ... but *not* to mana whenua. To the Crown.

And so as a way of beginning to heal the wounds of the past, the church took what it had – its land – and gave it to those in poverty: to whose land had been robbed off them. The wealth of the hapū, its whenua and its taonga, had been taken away and the church was giving it back. Such a decision is a remarkable act of generosity in order to begin to right the wrongs of the past and to live out the ministry of reconciliation in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand today.

I certainly don’t think we would want to use this passage as a kind of biblical justification for the church *not* seeking to address inequality or the wrongs of the past; for *not* engaging in acts of generosity and self-giving to those in poverty. The example of the church in Tauranga lays a challenge, a *wero*, for all churches, including Knox. How will we seek to give of ourselves to help those who are poor, especially in the context of Aotearoa if our wealth has been built off historic abuse of the indigenous people by the colonists?

II.

On first reading, it's almost like John wanted to soften Jesus' apparently dismissive comments. "You will always have the poor with you. But you won't always have me, so leave Mary alone with her extravagant wastefulness." Jesus' comments are softened by John informing us that Judas didn't *really* care for the poor. He was a thief, stealing from the common purse in pursuit of his own interests. So Jesus' dismissiveness of the poor is ok, right?

Well, not really. Judas' ill intentions don't really soften Jesus' apparent hardness and indifference to the poor. And John is too careful a writer to make this kind of incoherent reasoning. I think his comment about Judas' self-interest is John's way of articulating a much deeper and uncomfortable truth as to *why* we will always have the poor with us.

The reason we always have the poor with us is *because* of human greed, exemplified by Judas. Or less pejoratively expressed, because of the human instinct for self-preservation in a dog-eat-dog world. Judas is not some devil in disguise. He is an ordinary human like the rest of us. Operating out of a mindset of scarcity and self-survival. A mindset that there is *not enough* to go round, and so if you don't look out for yourself, no one else is going to. Within this world of scarcity, regardless of all the good will in the world, we will never eliminate poverty or injustice. The belief that there is not-enough becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Evidenced recently by the fact that no matter how much toilet paper there is, the supermarkets shelves will still be empty...

This principle of self-preservation and greed is written into our economic systems. It seems scandalous to me, for example, that food prices are skyrocketing in New Zealand while the duopoly of Foodstuffs and Countdown pocketed a casual \$430 million in excess profits last year. Similar lack of competition has driven up prices in our energy and construction sectors. The headlines in NZ make for grim reading: housing unaffordability, rising interest rates, food and fuel price hikes... the list goes on. The cost of living is increasing faster than wages and not even this week's increase in benefit payments will come close to meeting the shortfall for many low income families. This is not an abstract problem. This is a daily reality.

It's an open secret that there is enough wealth in the world to solve poverty overnight... and yet poverty still exists. Now I realise that we're talking about incredibly complex economic systems and structures here. It's not simply a matter of setting aside the money. Of taxing people more as the left tends to do. Or taxing people less as is the right's preference. These issues can't simply be solved overnight.

But it's hard to get away from the simple fact that many people don't have enough in a world where there is more than enough. It's the way the world is. A world in which the rich prey on the poor. The strong prey on the weak. The powerful prey on the powerless.

It's the world described in our Isaiah reading. A world in which the Egyptian warriors on their chariots are continually chasing the people of Israel. A world in which the people wander the wilderness, hungering and thirsting in perpetuity.

Significant then that our Isaiah passage articulates a radical refusal to accept the way the world is:

*Do not dwell on the way things have been, says the Lord,
or consume yourself with the way the world is.*

*I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?*

*I will make a way in the barren wilderness
and rivers in the dry desert.*

God is doing a *new* thing. Disrupting our world of "not-enough" with "more-than-enough", of scarcity with abundance, of hunger and thirst with nourishment. In the wilderness, we're told, God is carving out a river, to sustain life for miles around. Do you not perceive it?

III.

Mary perceived it. It seems to me that this gets to the heart of our passage today. While Judas was operating out of a mindset of scarcity – of "not-enough", Mary, in her wasteful extravagance, was operating out of a mindset of abundance, of "more-than-enough". In Mary's world, there is no either-or: *either* you invest in big buildings and stained glass windows *or* you invest in the poor. For Mary, it's a both-and as we live our lives in whole-hearted self-giving to the extravagant self-giving of God's life for us. Here worship of God and service of others are not in competition with one another, but are two-sides of the same coin as the church gathers around the banquet feast, invited to live in the abundant reality of God-with-us.

It strikes me that Mary's response didn't come out of nowhere. In the chapter before, we hear how Jesus resurrected Mary's brother, Lazarus, to life. She gets it. She's cottoned on. She realises that in Jesus, God's abundant life is being poured out for the world before our very eyes, disrupting the way things are. Interrupting our scarcity, our need, our limit – even that final limit of death. Not even the grave can hold out the river of God's love and life. In Jesus, God's life is poured out for the world culminating in his own death on the cross. And there in the scarcity, the lack of life of life that is death, God's love wells up and pours over, breaking open the very gates of hell.

Mary's devotion takes place between the resurrection of Lazarus and the resurrection of Jesus. Resurrection to resurrection. Abundance to abundance. Life to life. She lives in this space, no longer dwelling on the way the world is but on the new thing that God is doing among us.

Between the two resurrection stories in John is the cross: that ultimate declaration of God's self-giving love. Mary's anointing of Jesus with oil anticipates his death, as if she were preparing his body for the grave. Like Mary, the church is called to live in this in between space between resurrection and resurrection. To worship the God whose way is extravagant and self-giving love into unto death and, like Mary, to learn to live out of the extravagance. Amen.

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Knox Church
449 George Street
Dunedin
New Zealand
Ph. (03) 477 0229
www.knoxchurch.net

Jordan Redding 027 428 5234, jordan.redding@otago.ac.nz