

Lent 5 C
St. John 12:1-8
March 13, 2016
St. George's Bolton
Fr. Chris

A Question of Your Priorities

"You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

We ought to appreciate what we've got while we've got it, as nothing stays the same. The only thing about life you can be certain of beside death and taxes, is *change*.

Jesus is getting very personal here. While it would be easy to say money should not be spent on a costly luxury such as "nard" was in Jesus' day, and that such money should be spent upon a worthy cause such as feeding the poor or alleviating their suffering, the opportunity to show affection to someone you love or care about should not be passed up either. Generosity is almost never wrong: showing kindness and thinking of others first is also a staple of the *Gospel message*.

So it was that Mary and Martha both ministered to Jesus when he visited their home with his disciples. They were already among the inner circle of his closest friends. It is no surprise that they would offer the most tender and intimate hospitality to their friend. It showed that they made his presence a priority, and tending to him showed their appreciation of his importance and place in their lives.

What are life's priorities, do you suppose? What do you think the priorities of life would be from God's perspective? ... God first. Other people a close second. Everything else, well, it has its place if you can find the time for it, without sacrificing your priorities and without betraying the values which God has given you to live by. Jesus' answer to Mary is to be mindful of your priorities so you do not miss the main opportunities to live them in your life. There will always be important things to do. The poor we will always have with us.

Still, there is the temptation to misuse this passage as a justification for spending a lot of money on the church buildings or the garb for persons such as myself. *I do not see the correlation.*

When I was working at a church in Hartford, we had a set of very fine vestments which were used only at Easter and Christmas. In fact, they are the most valuable vestments in the whole diocese. The chasuble, the celebrant's cope and the altar frontal are made of cloth of gold. The Deacon and Sub Deacon's vestments are made of cloth of gold and silver. To be clear, cloth of gold and silver does not refer merely to a color or their appearance, but rather to the literal precious metals contained in the thread that made up these vestments, frontals, etc. (The etc. included the pulpit fall, lectern drapes, and the cope and a maniple for the priest.) The chasuble alone was worth about \$17,000.00 in the year 2001. You can only imagine what the whole set would be worth today. The Bishop desired to use them at the 200th anniversary service of the Episcopal Church in Connecticut at the Civic Center many years ago, but the diocesan insurance company said that it would be too risky to use them in this venue. So they did not. Now imagine what you could do if you sold just the chasuble, how much good you might do with the proceeds. That

amount of money could build the new front entrance for St. George's, badly needed due to leaks in its roof. Should the church be the repository of such things as cloth of gold and jewel encrusted chalices and Gospel books? (which that parish also had, among several others in the diocese)

A good question. Certainly as stewards of our church properties, we should exercise good care of that with which we have been entrusted. Our parish worship spaces should reflect the dignity and importance that our faith leads us to exercise here on earth. But is there a point at which we are overdoing it?

A friend of mine from college, who I showed that gold vestment set to, was not as impressed as I expected. Rather, the comment was made to me, *"my how far removed you are from the values you had back in college about helping the poor and living in a humble way!"*

Then there was the huge Roman Catholic church building next to mine, with its marvelous stone work and carved exterior, which was a cover to the exquisite marble interior, filled with beautiful carvings and statues, as well as a lovely hand carved set of the fourteen Stations of the Cross. The interior was palatial. And the parish was populated by and built from the donations of humble factory workers at the Royal and Underwood Factories just down the street, people who labored long hours and whose meager pay denied them the opportunity to even own a home. This bothered me for some time, as though they had been taken advantage of, until I thought and prayed about and realized, that while these poor and simple folk would never darken the doors of the homes of the wealthy individuals and families who employed them, but they would always be welcomed in God's house as their own home away from home, and here, in their true home, the place was more

palatial then any wealthy person could afford! I kept thinking of the text which quotes Jesus as saying, *"in my Father's house are many rooms (or some texts say, mansions) if it were not so would I say I go and prepare a place for you?"* So if they could not afford even a modest home in the city where they lived and worked, at least they could visit and pray in God's home, and that exceeded any wonder and wealth they could imagine. *I got it.*

But sometimes, grand churches exceed the boundaries we might imagine and they challenge the idea that this religion was founded by a humble carpenter who owned no home and lived a life of holy poverty, feeding the poor and healing the sick. Ought not we, as the scriptures suggest, do the same? *"Go sell what you have and give to the poor."*

This came into sharper focus for me one night this week, as I was eating out at a fine restaurant. As I reflected on this passage, and the luxury I enjoy of having the time to reflect on such a passage, I wondered out loud whether it was wrong to sit down to such a lavish and costly feast, by the standards of many, when there are so many poor folks who lack enough to eat, or who could never enjoy such a blessing on this earth, which I seem to be able to do as a matter of course? And then the last words of today's Gospel rang out in my ears: *"The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me."*

Now mind you, I am not trying to escape from or justify a lifestyle which would ignore my Christian duty to make the poor a priority in my life, and to live the Gospel life of such generosity, both of spirit and of treasure. However, I am also to appreciate and make a priority my loved ones, my friends and family. I am to make them a priority, because I may not always have them with me.

This point never became clearer to me the night my father died. I was with him in the hospital. As 8:30 pm rolled around, I remembered I had to pick up a unique circular fluorescent bulb at Home Depot for my kitchen, where the current bulb had burned out, leaving it in darkness. So I excused myself, said good bye to my father and ran to the store to buy the bulb. On arriving home and walking in the door, the phone rang. It was the hospital, telling me that my father had passed away. I had left his deathbed to go pick up a light bulb. Life changes in a few moments and opportunities are forever missed and gone. Such is the choice of priorities we face every day, that may not seem important at the time. Our challenge is to be spiritually present enough in life not to miss these priorities, and to be present to others, and not merely our inner circle, but also to the strangers we may encounter along the way.

There is surely plenty of material poverty in the world, and **that** we will always have with us. But there is also spiritual poverty which comes from focusing on the material goods and treasure of this world, instead of the people God gives us who are all around us. These are the opportunities of life, the real priorities of the school of love in which we live and study daily.

Yes, the poor we will always have with us. But what is a higher priority: **the people or their poverty?** One of the nicest compliments I hear from the people who come to use our Mobile Foodshare truck, is not about the food they receive, but is about the kindness and respect that they get from the people who serve them: and that would be the volunteers from St George's and the Methodist Church of Bolton. It is hard enough to show up to receive handouts from a truck intended for the impoverished, without being further humiliated by people who dehumanize you,

treat you as dirt, or like greedy children who need to be corrected by an angry parent. If someone is so angry with the poor, or disdains them so much, I have often wondered, why do they desire to volunteer in a soup kitchen or food pantry or at mobile Foodshare? Thank God, that is not how people are treated here. And really, that is what today's Gospel is all about: appreciating the presence of God in our midst, the God who often appears to us and asks us to serve him in the face of a stranger or a friend in need: (Remember Matthew 25, where it says, "*I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat; thirsty and you gave me something to drink, naked and you clothed me, sick, or in prison and you visited me. As you did it to the least of these, you did it to me.*")

The only thing beside death and taxes you can be certain of in this life is change. The opportunities we have been given to be present to others will not always remain for us to choose. Life changes. Opportunities disappear. Therefore, my friends, seize the day and the blessed opportunities God sends your way. They are not to be missed.

The poor you **will** always have with you. This is another way of saying, you will always have work to do, priorities of things that need to be done, tugging at your conscience, or causing anxiety on your list of things to do. It is also always a choice for us, to be present to those whom God gives us for a brief time on this earth, or to busy ourselves with earthly things and matters, ignoring our loved ones and the strangers who are **other Christs** whom we are called to serve. Amen

