BLAIRGOWRIE & ALYTH 130316

John 12: 1-8

Later today, I shall be in Dundee to speak to a group in the Mormon Church as part of an event that they are having to mark International Women’s Day. It’s a strange thing to be asked to do. They want me to say something about women of faith …

So I’ll start as one has to do in Dundee with the teenage girls magazine Jackie – now celebrated in a musical. But much more seriously, I am sure that you like me have been watching the parents who lost their children in the Dundee tragedy speaking around the 20th anniversary. They speak – both men and women – without bitterness and anger. They speak with a measured compassion which allows them to carry their loss with them – but to continue to live. I have found them deeply, deeply impressive.

And I’m going to say something both about Northern Ireland and of my experience of India – where I have now been four times. It is always dangerous and unwise to suggest that particular strengths and characteristics belong to one gender only. But my experience has been that there are some things which are found more often in women than in men.

In Northern Ireland, there were undoubtedly some fiercely bitter women. But I also learned over the years that, if I was attempting to help people to move forward, my natural allies were most often going to be women. They would not be publicly vocal and they would certainly not act in ways which brought conflict to their families. But equally they had moral courage which meant that they could see beyond the conflict, could measure its cost and see how change could be made which would lead them forwards. You may think of Betty and Mairead, the leaders of the Peace People. I think of a quiet lady whom I knew very well. At the height of the Drumcree Parading Conflict in which her family was deeply involved, I sat with her and her husband. As she took me to the door, she said quietly, ‘I wasn’t born to this’. And I felt her pain at that moment.

And in India – well there are two strands to that. Firstly there is the growing awareness of women’s issues and of the hiddenness of the abuse of women in Indian society. Secondly, in terms of the huge problems of poverty, deprivation and simply squalor which India has, it is the women who sound as if they have some ideas about how they might tackle that. We met able and articulate women – and some impressive sixth form girls in one of the schools – who looked as if they would be able to shape necessary change.

In the light of all that, it is not surprising that we read today the story of Mary and Martha – Martha who faithfully serves and practices hospitality and Mary who pours out her love and her compassion in the form of the precious ointment. The men say, ‘What a waste’ and fail to understand. Jesus understands that this is a costly gesture which is to be understood in terms of his own journey towards the cross and his death. He could see that Mary was displaying a deep spiritual insight – not just a waste of costly ointment but part of his own journey of sacrifice and suffering.

Paul also speaks of a pouring out – ‘I regard everything as loss because of Christ. More than that I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.’ Price doesn’t matter. The value is in what the action signifies at the deepest spiritual level.

This is Passion Sunday – a week before Palm Sunday and the beginning of Holy Week. It’s a day on which we look forwards towards the Cross and its meaning. We think about the reality of sacrifice – because sacrifice is so clearly part of God’s vision for the redemption and the restoration of a sinful world.