

Sunday Thought

3rd April 2022 Fifth Sunday in Lent

Readings

Isaiah 43: 16 - 21

Psalm 126

Philippians 3: 4b - 14

John 12: 1 - 8

Lenten Accounting

Many churches will have celebrated Our Lady's Day on 25th March. Lady Day remembers the visit to Mary by the angel Gabriel telling her she was to be the mother of the Christ. Until 1752 the day also marked the beginning of a new tax year and was the day on which farm tenancies began. With the change to the Gregorian calendar the tax date moved to 6th April. Some people still argue for it to be the first of January, yet I think it may be appropriate that in nearly all years, Tax Day comes in Lent. For Christians, Lent is traditionally a time when we are invited to take account of our lives and look at our spiritual profits and losses. Today's readings are helpful in that context.



The prophet Isaiah has a message from the Lord, full of hope for his people – hope of return from exile, seventeen hundred miles away in Babylon. The people are asked to look at an old account, to remember the losses incurred in leaving Egypt and their forty-year journey of desert life, and set them against the profits of life in the Promised Land under God's provision and care. *'Now', God says, 'I will do a new thing, and lead you home from exile to build a new life. Your years of loss will be more than recovered. 'Tears today – 'Joy tomorrow.'*

The Gospel story too is about real values. Jesus is at a feast in the home of Martha and Mary and their brother Lazarus whom he called back to life from his grave. Lazarus and Jesus reclined together at the table. Martha, as always, the perfect hostess, cannot resist giving the servants a hand. This left Mary free to make her extravagant gesture of loving gratitude for her brother's life and for Jesus' friendship. Her jar of heady, musky nard perfume may have represented a whole year's income for the poorest servants there, but it is seen by Jesus for what it really is – a wonderful act of grateful devotion. Judas thought different. He oversaw the 'Jesus' Mission' money bag. I do not suppose he had an account book, but sums were running through his mind. *'What a waste! Think of the poor! What a loss!'*

Jesus followed Judas' concerned thoughts, assuring him of real profits. *'Mary only used a small amount of the nard on my feet. She will keep the rest. It will save you spending on my burial oils. If you really care, you will always have enough to share with the poor. 'Here in Lazarus' house, you've seen Mary's loving faith and Martha's devoted care – you should see her kitchen! Judas, look at our real accounts, think of our real values.'*

Paul does just that when writing to the loving church fellowship at Philippi. He gets right to the heart of the values of Christian life and experience. In a personal testimony he opens the pages of his own profit and loss account. I am personally grateful I can share something of Paul's witness. First, like him I too am in a relationship! Don't imagine that's a scandal! I'm only too pleased for you to gossip about it. The relationship is with Jesus, my Lord and Saviour. I hope you share it too.

With Paul I can say, *'I've been doing my Lenten accounts.'* I could add my life-profits, like the great value of my Christian heritage, life and upbringing, my devotion to the life of the Church, my vocation, my years of service, my life-learning through failure and success, all my friendships in many different places and churches, BUT I am ready to drop all those gains into the loss column, for I have an amazing number of other profits! I cannot call them all gains because most were gifts from God. MY inestimable wealth is to know Jesus. Paul says, *'that is what it means to be a Christian'*. I hope you can share that through this Lent and are able to make these next weeks a prayerful time of getting to know Jesus in a fuller way, near the cross, sharing his pain for a desperately needy world, and living in joyous certainty of his resurrection. Lent then becomes what Paul with his sporting interest, sees as the 'Great Joy Race' to the life above – together with all the other runners.

I heard of an elderly gentleman visiting his accountant. He said to him, *'Don't worry about what I've gained or lost. Just tell me what I'm worth.'* Ask that of God and he will show you a cross and a completely new, blank ledger.

A Prayer (with Psalm 126 in mind)

Lord, there is so much war in your world,
in Ukraine, Afghanistan, Syria, Myanmar etc. etc.....
Like disease and famine, it leaves lands broken, desolate and empty. Many men, women and children are longing for home, for peace, for health, education and prosperity.

Lord, let them return, as you brought your people home before.
Where lands are barren, make them fertile again.
Where homes are destroyed may they rise again.
Restore the life which has been cruelly taken from their people.
Bring about the time when they shall return, like a fulfilled dream,
sowing seeds of prosperity in tearful hope, and reaping their many harvests with new joy.

