

John 12: 1-8. Jesus anointed at Bethany. 6th April 2025

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be pleasing to you our God, rock and redeemer.

If we were following the lectionary last week we would have heard of God's amazing, lavish, unconditional love for us as seen through the parable of the lost son. We did however hear this message of unconditional love through Ian Whitehill's stories from Prison Fellowship, of people in prison being transformed through God's amazing love and grace. As we look at the gospel reading today, we hear how we can show extravagant, lavish love to God...

Scandalous Love!

A woman kneeling at Jesus feet; lets out her hair and wipes his feet. Who is this woman who dares do such a thing?

There are four accounts of this story – Mathew and Mark describe an unnamed woman from Bethany who, while Jesus dined in the home of Simon the Leper just days before his death, anoints his head with expensive ointment. Luke writes of 'a woman of the city, who was a sinner' often considered to be a prostitute who bathes Jesus' feet with a mixture of perfume and tears, wiping his feet with her hair and kissing them with her lips.

The account we have just heard is from John who identifies the woman as Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus.

Whatever the situation, it seems that this is something that happened – as all the gospels have an account of it, even if slightly varied. We will be looking at the account from John where it says it was Mary of Bethany and the feet not the head were anointed. Though both are very symbolic the anointing the feet, however, models service, discipleship and love. In this sense, John's account is more personal and raw.

In a culture in which a woman's touch was often forbidden, Mary dares to cradle the feet of Jesus in her hands and spread the oil across his ankles and toes with the ends of her hair. A woman unbinding her hair was regarded as most unseemly, so Mary is clearly moved by the deepest feeling of loyalty in being willing to brave the inevitable social disapproval. It was scandalous love.

Why wasn't she serving dinner like Martha? Like a good Jewish woman? Well, we already know something of Mary's choices that broke with the norm. In Luke 10: 36-42 we read of Jesus' visit to their house where Martha is upset because Mary is sitting at Jesus feet listening to what he had to say while Martha was busy with all the food preparations.

Martha didn't approve of what Mary was doing but Jesus did.

Again, in this story Martha is serving food, she doesn't rebuke Mary this time. Martha's worship of Jesus is in her act of serving.

Unconditional Love

Mary gave her love unconditionally – she was not worried what others may think of her. She just thinks of Jesus.

Do we just focus on Jesus when we are worshiping him, or do we worry about those around us? We may feel led in an act of praise to raise our hands – but are conscious of what others will think of us – or if I feel compelled to kneel – others may think I'm strange. Mary just looked on Jesus and loved him, worshipping as she felt compelled, with her heart and spirit full of love.

And how often do we put conditions on our love, on our worship? Expecting some blessing, maybe a spiritual buzz or answered prayer or a good life. Mary had already received so much from Jesus, as have we. She had sat at his feet revelling in his presence and teaching. In the previous chapter of John, Jesus had raised her brother Lazarus from the dead! When she had been in utter grief over his death she fell at Jesus' feet and he had shown compassion and wept with her. He had also shown his authority over death. She knew who he was. Jesus had already poured out his love and grace upon her and this night she pours out her perfume – she doesn't care about the gossip or the criticism – she just unconditionally gives. She doesn't give meagrely but she gives;

Extravagantly – Extravagant love!

Rather than measuring out a small amount of oil, Mary breaks the jar and lets it all pour out, a whole pint...that's a lot of perfume! Here's the size of my perfume bottles compared to a pint! She's all-in, fully committed, sparing no expense. The oil she may have been reserving for her own burial, or the burial of a loved one, has been poured out generously, without thought of the future. The value of this nard was indeed enormous, equivalent to a year's wages it says!

Extremely extravagant you might say, and some might agree with Judas' criticism that it could have been spent on the poor. Except we know his judgements are hypocritical as he had apparently been helping himself to the money bag – he didn't care about the poor.

We know that Jesus did care for the poor so we are not to read his comment that you '*will always have the poor with you*' to mean not to care for them. In fact, at another time in Mathew 25 he says that whatever you do for the least of these you are doing for me. Indeed, our giving to the poor and caring for the impoverished should be part of our worship to Jesus. How can you generously give to the poor right now – perhaps through one of the many appeals for the suffering in Myanmar after the earthquake?

Jesus defends Mary saying '*Leave her alone. It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me.*' Verse 7. Jesus points to his most costly all-consuming self-sacrificing mission he is heading to in the coming days.

She pours out her most expensive perfume, but Jesus is about to show even more extravagant love and pour out his life for her – for us. She seems to have prophetic insight that the disciples missed. Dare I say that maybe it's because she's a woman?!! A loving, caring, sensitive woman who wants to give her all to Jesus.

Mary of Bethany is the first of Jesus' disciples to acknowledge his impending death. Jesus' remark that this perfume is for his burial could be received rather bleakly – what do you mean this is for your burial Jesus? we won't let you die! And yet Mary had just recently witnessed Jesus raise her brother to life! As sorrowful as she will be at Jesus' death, she knows resurrection hope.

Mary adores and worships Jesus now while she still has the chance. (later other women go to the tomb to anoint Jesus) How often do you hear at a funeral people praising the deceased and you wonder if they ever told the person that is how they felt? My nephew is currently dying of bowel cancer, he turned 40 last November and threw a big party to spend time with those he loved and who love him.

Mary did a beautiful thing in anointing Jesus while he was still with them. It was a fragrant sweet-smelling offer of praise. It would have pervaded the room. Jesus was pleased with her and the offering. (put on a bit of perfume...only those close can smell, but a whole pint would fill the room)

I felt very privileged several years ago to be with my mother the night she died. I didn't anoint her with perfume – but we had gathered a few hours before she died and my husband Michael, as a Priest, anointed her with oil. And then for the last few hours it was just her and me. I sang to her (Jesus loves me this I know – which she had learned in Swahili and would sing to us – she had been born in the Sudan to missionary parents) and put Vaseline on her lips, I held her hand. It was beautiful. My mum had given so much to me over her life- time, it was humbling and precious to be there to offer her comfort and, in a way, 'adore' her at the end.

Jesus has done so much more than our earthly parents – he deserves our generous worship. Jesus' meal in Bethany was on his way to Jerusalem where he went to the cross and died so that we could be reconciled to God and receive eternal life; in gratitude for what he has done for us we should be motivated to generously give and serve and spread the fragrance of the gospel to the world. How often do we hold back and only give a bit of ourselves, our worship, our money, our gifts and our service. Do we offer Jesus the best like Mary did – or do we grudgingly offer him the leftovers?

Our response: He gave himself for us. What is our gift of worship in response to Jesus extravagant love for us?

Soon we will be remembering his act of service in washing the disciples' feet on the night he was betrayed. He asks us to follow his example, to wash one another's feet. To love God and to love others.

Ann Spangler writes in a devotional about Mother Teresa as one who loved God extravagantly. Famous for her work with the poorest of the poor in India and throughout the world, Mother Teresa was always looking for a chance to do something 'beautiful for God'. Her caring for the poor and lepers was her worship to God.

How easy it is for us to neglect our giving to Jesus by always asking him to do things for us rather than us seeking to please and delight him. You don't have to travel to the other side of the world to do this. We can look for the poor in our own community – those who are emotionally impoverished, isolated or ill. Find a way to bring the light of God's love into their darkness, take them some flowers, make a phone call, go and visit with them. Pick up some food for the emergency food relief at San Remo.

We might find acts of service for others easy to do. But what about just spending quality time adoring and praising God? That is what we do when we love someone isn't it? It is

Michael and my wedding anniversary tomorrow and we are heading off today to spend some quality time together to celebrate our love for each other. We need to prioritise time with God and let him know how much we love him.

We should spend time letting God know he is special to us; praising him for who he is, for his creation, and he will be delighted with us as we read his word and visit with him in prayer.

Mary of Bethany is an example of a woman who loved Jesus wholeheartedly. May we be like her and sit at Jesus' feet to hear his wisdom and guidance; may we fall at Jesus feet when we are in grief, pain or trouble and know he weeps with us and is our healer and restorer and may we anoint Jesus feet with our praise and adoration and in our service – for he is our Saviour King.

Let's pray.

Lord, you have done so many beautiful things for us – by giving your life you have given us life – you have loved us with an amazing love. May we offer ourselves generously to you – not meagrely giving out favours in hope of a return, but as a woman who like Mary is totally in love with her maker. May our lives be a sweet-smelling fragrance pleasing to you.

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were an offering far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

Amen.