

Scripture Reading for 7th April 2019

John 12:1-8 (NET Bible)

Then, six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom he had raised from the dead. So they prepared a dinner for Jesus there. Martha was serving, and Lazarus was among those present at the table with him. Then Mary took three quarters of a pound of expensive aromatic oil from pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus. She then wiped his feet dry with her hair. (Now the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfumed oil.) But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was going to betray him) said, “Why wasn’t this oil sold for three hundred silver coins and the money given to the poor?” (Now Judas said this not because he was concerned about the poor, but because he was a thief. As keeper of the money box, he used to steal what was put into it.) So Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She has kept it for the day of my burial. For you will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me!”

Sermon: Totally Devoted

My family knows I love a good British TV drama. A well-written, well-acted drama with some humour and intrigue, moments of psychological tension, even a murder or two to explain, and a fitting climax. Curiously enough, I seem to like the hero to be a priest-detective!¹ In addition to stunning prose, it seems the writer of John’s Gospel also loved high drama! He presents the first miracle of Jesus as that of the wedding of Cana where they ran out of wine² and the last major miracle being the raising of Lazarus from the dead.³ This is then followed by the highly-charged events of the passion of Jesus the Messiah and his resurrection, a journey of which we are all too aware of with Easter fast approaching. Today’s reading is a connecting passage in which John links the raising of Lazarus with what was just about to happen. In fact, in the previous chapter John introduces Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, in this way: “It was Mary who anointed the Lord with perfumed oil and wiped his feet dry with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick.”⁴ It was as if this unusual deed defined Mary more graphically and more importantly than merely being the sister of a man who had been raised from the dead! Since the gospel writers portray Mary as a respectable woman who was devoted to Jesus, the drama of the occasion seems to have been etched on people’s minds.⁵

However, the raising of Lazarus also triggered deadly opposition; the irony is that giving life causes Jesus’ death.⁶ John tells us that from that day on the religious leaders planned to put Jesus to death.⁷

¹ Such as Cadfael, Father Brown, Father Baldi, and the minister in Granchester!

² John 2:1-12.

³ John 11:1-44. (See also Luke 10:38–42.)

⁴ John 11:2.

⁵ This story, or variants of it, appear in Matt 26:6-13, Mark 14:3-9 and Luke 7:36-50. Consequently, this suggests it basis reflects some real event in the life of Jesus and firm feature of the various oral Jesus traditions. (See also Luke 10:38–42.)

⁶ See John 11:45-57.

⁷ John 11:53.

Indeed, “The chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that anyone who knew where Jesus was should let them know, *so that they might arrest him.*”⁸ They wondered if Jesus would have the audacity to come to Jerusalem during the pilgrimage season of Passover.⁹ High drama indeed! Within this growing tension in the gospel narrative, which is soon to be followed by the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, John tells us of this bizarre dinner¹⁰ party in Bethany.¹¹

Let us briefly consider the elements in this event, one that is also related in slightly different ways in the gospels of Mark and Mathew. Nard is an expensive aromatic perfume made from plants whose origins are from India. It is mentioned numerous times in the Old Testament and is sometimes associated with erotic love, being mentioned twice in the Song of Solomon.¹² Ironically it was also used to anoint the dead, so symbolically John weaves these twin themes of *death* and *love* together in this story. Mary is totally devoted to Jesus, just as Jesus is totally devoted to humanity - even to the point of death. John emphasises both the *quantity*, namely 325 grams, or 12 ounces,¹³ and the high *quality* of the perfume. This much perfume is excessive, completely overpowering. John writes “the *house was filled with the fragrance of the perfumed oil*” – almost as if recalling a memory.¹⁴ John is painting a vivid picture and invites us to use our sense of smell. In the previous chapter we are faced with the “stench of death,” when Jesus says, “Take away the stone.” Martha cautions him “Lord, already there is a *stink* because Lazarus has been dead four days.”¹⁵ Jesus replaces death with life; the reek of death is replaced by overpowering aroma of life.

Now let’s consider the *cost* of the perfume! One Roman silver coin was equivalent to a day’s wages; 300 of them is a year’s wage, when feast days and Sabbaths are taken into account. Just reflect on that for a moment. How much do *you* earn per year? Now imagine spending that on one large bottle of perfume. If you are a woman, you might find this easy to imagine! If you are a man and are struggling with this let me help you! One of the most expensive perfumes in the world is Clive Christian’s *Imperial Majesty*, costing \$12,700 an ounce. Now imagine giving \$150,000-worth [i.e., 12 ounces] of this fragrance to your wife, who happens to be called Mary, and who then pours it over the feet of some other man, named Jesus. Wow, there would be an almighty row in the car home that night!

But that isn’t the only shocking thing about this incident. John says that Mary “wiped his feet dry with her hair.”¹⁶ In Palestine, no respectable woman would ever appear in public with her hair unbound. On the day that a girl was married, her hair was bound up and she was never again seen in public with her

⁸ John 11:57.

⁹ John 11:56.

¹⁰ The only other time John uses the Greek word for “dinner” is for the “Last Supper” (John 13:2,4; 21:20). Perhaps this use also foreshadows the events that are about to happen; i.e., John 12:7. (Jesus and Lazarus were likely in places of honour.)

¹¹ Bethany was three kilometers away from Jerusalem, a suitable place for Passover pilgrims to seek accommodation.

¹² Song of Solomon 1:12; 4:13.

¹³ This corresponds to the “pound” (NRSV) or “pint” (NIV) of pure nard; John 12:3 – see NET Bible. Only John mentions the quantity of the perfume; one cannot rule out the possibility of some exaggeration for literary/rhetorical effect.

¹⁴ Leslie Newbiggin points out, “The fragrance of the Gospel will eventually fill the whole world!”

¹⁵ John 11:39.

¹⁶ John 12:3b. Notice that Mary has no speaking part in this drama.

long hair flowing loose. Here, Mary publicly lets down her hair and wipes¹⁷ the anointed feet of Jesus. This is outrageous, even sexually provocative, and awkward for her hard-working sister Martha to witness, let alone the male on-lookers. It seems that Mary never gave a thought about what others might think; her heart was overflowing with love and gratitude for Jesus, the man who had brought her brother back to life.

So it's no surprise there was a verbal reaction at this dinner party! In Mark's version the criticism was by unnamed persons, in Matthew's it was by the disciples; for John, it is Judas Iscariot.¹⁸ The point is the same: "Why wasn't this oil sold and the money given to the poor?"¹⁹ This logical and ethical question seems to avoid the more embarrassing and sensational elements of what the disciples had just witnessed; yet it is a good and fair question! Especially given the *timing* of the occasion; Jews knew they were to be mindful of those in need and there was a special emphasis on giving to the poor in Passover week.²⁰ Selling the fragrance and giving the proceeds to the poor is a sensible response. Surely Jesus can see the merit in that? What does Jesus say? "Leave her alone. She has kept it *for the day of my burial*. For you will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me!"²¹

Jesus does *not* answer the question that John puts in the mouth of Judas and instead says sharply, "Leave her alone." Judas was judging both the woman *and* the act; Jesus *defends* her. He recognises Mary's heart and interprets her overwhelmingly extravagant gift in the *context* of his own upcoming burial.²² Jesus knows that his words, actions, and very presence are making religious and political waves, and as such he is on a collision course with the 'powers that be' that will inevitably lead to his death. John, of course, is retelling and interpreting events with the benefit of hindsight. Perhaps Mary intuitively knows what the disciples still don't truly understand, namely, Christ's death is imminent. Indeed, given John relates the triumphal entry into Jerusalem as the very next day, the idea that Jesus may soon die – or be killed – probably seemed unthinkable. However, in replying this way, Jesus is *not* saying that we shouldn't give to the poor! Jesus was, in fact, quoting from Deuteronomy where it says: "There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore, I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy."²³ Of course we should care for the poor! But in this case, Jesus praises Mary and makes an urgent point: "You won't always have me with you; I will soon die!" Therefore, what Mary has done is especially *timely* – whether she realised that or not.²⁴

¹⁷ The verb "to wipe" here is the same word to Jesus' later wiping the disciple's feet after washing their feet; John 13:1-17. This connection should not be overlooked.

¹⁸ This connection with Judas could also, for John, link this event with the Passover meal, where Jesus singles out Judas as the one who will betray him Jesus. See John 13:18-30 (and 6:70 – 71). There is clearly an anti-Judas sentiment in John.

¹⁹ John 12:5.

²⁰ Moreover, "Bethany" means "house of the poor." See also John 13:29.

²¹ John 12:7-8.

²² John, Matthew, and Mark all make the same point concerning preparation for Jesus' *burial*. However, Matthew and Mark have Jesus' head being anointed by the fragrance, which may well signify anointing a king (or priest).

²³ Deut 15: 11.

²⁴ Moreover, John provides a commentary saying that Judas wasn't altruistic in his complaint, because he was a thief who stole from the disciples' common purse that he carried; John 12:6; 13:29.

Judas, and others with a similar attitude, quibble over the legitimacy of the Mary's radical act of love, while Mary herself demonstrates true discipleship – total devotion to Jesus. To set giving to the poor *over* or *against* devotion to Jesus is to miss the real motive for Christian discipleship and worship. Devotion to Jesus and gratitude for that was accomplished by his death and resurrection will inevitably *lead* to service for the poor – which will always be needed, as Jesus reiterates. And churches today must take note on this serious point and give *both* of our collective time and money to those in need, both locally and world-wide.

However, what sticks out to me is the vivid *contrast* between Mary and Judas, between a faithful follower of Jesus and an unfaithful one. Mary lavishes her love on her master with a gift worth 300 pieces of silver. Judas later betrays his master for 30 pieces of silver.²⁵ Mary is *not* counting the cost when she anoints Jesus; not just in terms of the perfume, but also in terms of her self-respect and social standing. She took the most precious thing she possessed and spent it all on Jesus. Such is her extravagant devotion. Judas, however, *was* counting the cost! Money seemed to exert an enticing and corrupting power over him. This seems to be part of John's emphasis, probably because he sees Judas as moving from light toward the dark side. And if we weren't predisposed to see Judas as "the Betrayer," we could well sympathise with Judas' point of view.²⁶ All this wealth appears to have been wasted in one impulsive gesture. However, Judas was somewhat embittered and therefore he had a warped view of things.²⁷ Light will always cast shadows; the bright light of Mary's total devotion and timely action, and the dark shadow of Judas' selfish resentment. The extravagant devotion of Mary cannot coexist with the mean spirit that calculates the cost of everything and recognises the value of nothing."

How do we personally demonstrate *our* devotion to Jesus? Is our devotion measured by what we gave up for Lent? By giving 10% to the Church? By giving to various charities? And yes, it is true, devotion is not necessarily measured in dollars and cents; time and good deeds *are* equally important. Even so, how do we demonstrate our own devotion to Jesus? Mary's way was overwhelming! Completely over the top! She gave lavishly of what she valued, without thinking about the cost. Overflowing generosity is one of John's themes, beginning with the wedding of Cana. Wherever Jesus is present, there is abundance. Let our love be equally generous! Much of modern church life focuses only on what is useful, practical, or cost-effective. While we can't justify wasting God's gifts, I don't think God calls church communities to live spendthrift lives either. Let us rediscover God's generosity and live accordingly for the sake of the kingdom of God!

Mary and Judas are *contrasting* witnesses of Jesus; the perfume of faithful follower of Jesus and the stench of an unfaithful one. What is the "smell" of our devotion? Do *we* have *half-hearted* devotion? If so, what are we going to do about it? As Easter approaches, let us reflect deeply and respond appropriately. Amen.

²⁵ Matt 26:15. (John does not mention this aspect.)

²⁶ Matt 26:8 portrays the same attitude in *all* the disciples.

²⁷ Judas is often portrayed as someone disappointed in Jesus and his understanding of messiahship.