

Lent 5 C 7.4.19 St Stephen's 11am Jn 12: 1-8
3.4.22

"Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair." (v3)

There's a poem by Ruth Gibbs Zwall, which captures both the deep love of Mary for Jesus, and the relationship between the gift and his coming passion, read to us in this morning's gospel:

She brought her gift of worship to adorn_
The one she loved, and poured it on his brow,
That brow so soon to feel the plaited thorn,
The mockery of those who came to bow.

She brought her gift of service freely there
And poured it out upon the Savior's feet –
Those feet that had the piercing nails to bear,
The journey to the Cross – God's mercy seat.

And when the women came with burial token
That Dawn, she was not there among the rest.
The alabaster box already broken,
She had anointed him and given her best:

The fragrance of her gift that filled the room
Had reached beyond the Cross, beyond the tomb.

Jesus is entering the last week before his passion. He knows that he is a marked man – the chief priests had given orders that Jesus was to be arrested, and commanded anyone who knew his whereabouts to report this. "Now the chief priest and the Pharisees had given orders that anyone who knew where he was must report it, so that they might arrest him." (11: v57)

Jesus is resting in Bethany with his friends, taking a moment to relax. Martha, as usual, has cooked the supper and was serving it to the company – no less a gift than that of Mary, her sister.

Mary's gift of love mirrors and anticipates the greater love of Christ, as John tells us: "It was before the Passover festival, and Jesus knew that his hour had come, and that he must leave this world and go to the Father." (13: v1)

In financial terms it was a foolhardy thing to do, to squander this perfume in this way, as I have no doubt that it wasn't only Judas who thought so. But love cannot be measured in terms of money, but in generosity of giving – and this perfume was a truly generous gift.

As one reads the gospel there is a shadow of foreboding over this time of relaxation, and Mary was determined to declare her love for Jesus, whatever the cost. Jesus, in his reply to Judas, acknowledges the gift, and the wider context in which it had been given – "She has bought it do that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." (12: v7,8)

It was Judas who put into words what I'm sure some others were thinking – "What a waste. The perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor."

There's a well-known saying of Oscar Wilde in answer to the question: "What is a cynic? It is a man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing." Judas seems to have had an inability to appreciate the nature of the generosity of love, which may also explain his actions later in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Jesus was well aware that Judas was someone apart from the rest of the disciples. It may be that he had hoped for a revolutionary Jesus who would raise the flag of revolt against the hated Romans. As Jesus' ministry unfolded, Judas was becoming more and more disillusioned, until he finally betrayed Jesus. As with revolutionaries the world over, human life and love become trampled for the ideal. In spite of his reward, it was Judas who had lost, not Jesus.

Still, as of old man by himself is priced;
For thirty silver pieces Judas sold himself, not Christ.

It is so easy to jump to conclusions when looking at the behavior of others, and to see things in a bad light, misunderstanding what lies behind an action. Our secular age tends to judge the value of everything in money terms – no wonder so much of modern life has become drab, losing that sense of wonder at the beauty of the world and the enjoyment of our relationships.

Mary's gift is also a reminder of the need for generosity – generosity in giving our time to help and encourage others; in reaching out to those in need. Generosity in being prepared just to give time to our meetings with others and simply enjoy being with them.

There is a natural tendency in all of us to express our love in terms of giving, and with so much emphasis upon the individual in today's society, we need to try to deepen a sense of interdependence and care for one another.

The late Queen Mary was out walking near Balmoral one overcast day, and she had wandered further than she realised. It came on to rain, and became heavier as the minutes passed, so she stopped at a cottage and asked if she could borrow an umbrella. As the cottager didn't realise it was the Queen, she decided to lend her an old umbrella with a broken rib. The next day a man in gold braid knocked at the cottage door and said: "Queen Mary asked me to thank you for lending her your umbrella." The woman was dumbfounded, and felt mortified. "What an opportunity I missed. Why didn't I give the Queen the best umbrella I had?"

Behind all we've been thinking about this morning is love. As St Paul says in 1 Cor 13: "I may speak with the tongue of men or of angels, but if I have no love, I am a sounding gong or a clanging cymbal. I may have the gift of prophecy and the knowledge of every hidden truth; I may have faith enough to move mountains, but if I have no love, I am nothing. I may give all my possessions to the needy, I may give my body to be burnt, but if I have no love, I gain nothing by it." (vv1-3)

It is love which lies behind Mary's gift to Jesus; it is love which lies at the heart of the passion; and it is love which we are asked to reflect in our own lives that others may come to honour Jesus as the light and hope of the world. Robert Lowry wrote:

Here is love as the ocean,
Loving kindness like the flood.
When the prince of Life, our ransom,
Shed for us his precious blood.

This is the pattern for our own response to God love in Christ. A young man went to work in China as a missionary doctor. He was sent inland because of sickness among more senior staff and found himself on his own in an isolated hos[ital and not knowing the language. To his horror and epidemic broke out. He was inexperienced in tropical diseases so couldn't diagnose it, let alone treat it. He needed advice from Shanghai. It was clear that none of his patients would survive the journey; if someone who had just caught the illness might just get there, and have the illness diagnosed.

He took blood from an infected patient and injected himself, setting off for Shanghai. He arrived safely, but had developed the illness and died, giving his life to save others.