

# Mary Anoints Jesus' Feet...

*... an abundant, extravagant and loving response*

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*A sermon given on the Fifth Sunday of Lent, 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2022, by the Curate the Revd Dr Tim Kelly, in Beverley Minster*

*John 12:1-8*

Ignatius of Loyola suggested a particular way of reading the Bible. His suggestion was that we should spend time with a passage using our imagination to place ourselves within the story, that we should try to imagine what we might see, smell, feel and hear, and what the other persons in the scene might be doing. If you've never tried this before, today's Gospel reading is a perfect passage to begin with. Imagine yourself in that room: the sights and sounds of Jesus sitting round a table with Martha, Mary and Lazarus; to imagine for a moment, what would they be talking about; would they still be talking about what happened six days before; and then Mary's bringing out of the costly perfume; just imagine that smell filling the room as she wipes Jesus's feet; and then the argument, the anger of Judas, the anger of somebody who is so utterly convinced that he is right; and then Jesus's response. Can you imagine the tension filling that room? Imagine a room with Jesus's friends and disciples, and the mood has suddenly turned from laughter and good conversation to a stand-up row, apparently over money.

Now all these things would be very interesting to imagine - different ways of placing ourselves in a story. But this morning I want to suggest that one of the most significant things to do is to imagine either being Mary or to imagine being Judas.

Being Mary, for a moment, consider what has made you do this? What has brought you to the point of wanting to spend a year's wages on perfume just for Jesus? But even more importantly, what does it feel like to wipe the feet of Jesus with that perfume? To wipe them with your own hair? To be so completely and totally caught up in worshipping him that we didn't care the cost or what anyone else thought?

And then being Judas for a moment, what does it feel like to have that anger and disgust rise up within you? "I'm willing to follow Jesus," you might have thought, "But this? This is too much. This is one step too far; too reckless; too extravagant."

So who would you choose to be?

Mary with her extravagant response or Judas with his cold hearted response? The two characters represent two very different ways to live our lives.

If we were favourable to Judas for a moment, we might try to characterise his position with words such as prudent, careful or considered. If Judas were around today, he'd certainly be the one switching off the central heating, or at the very least, turning down the thermostats in response to a rising energy crisis and telling us all to put on a woolly jumper. He's done the cost-benefit analysis and he's worked out just what is justified, what is in budget and what is sensible. But if it seems attractive somehow to paint him in this way, beware! - we're told that despite the cost of the perfume being his objection, his mention of the poor isn't necessarily his concern. He's been syphoning off the money anyway. The apparent reasonableness of his objection is a smokescreen, a post-rationalisation of his disgust at the recklessness of Mary. So many reasons could have been given - Can't you see what this looks like, Jesus? To have a woman washing your feet like this with her hair. Can't you see that this looks bad? Jesus, what will people say about you? So many reasons he could have chosen. But he decided to go with the line of argument about money. Yes, that's going to be why this is unreasonable. Any sensible person could see that.

And then there's Mary. When you place yourself in her shoes, what would that feel like? It's almost the exact opposite of Judas: if he were characterised as guarded, under control and measured - she is unguarded; she is almost recklessly, out of control and she doesn't care. This is her Lord. And she's far from measured. She is abundant. Her actions are over-the-top and wildly extravagant.

It's over 20 years ago now, but I can still remember walking around the jewellers of York looking for the engagement ring with which I was to propose to Charlotte and ask her to marry me. It wasn't quite the year's wages that the pound of NARD cost in today's reading, but even as a none-too-well paid university researcher at the time, I was prepared to pay a pretty high price to get something that seemed right, something that seemed fitting, and most importantly, that showed Charlotte something about how much I loved her. At this point, I could have listened to my inner Judas- "You don't need to spend that much money. Think of all the sensible things that you could do with that money: save it; invest it; put it towards the mortgage." But you know what? I wouldn't have listened. I was in full 'Mary-mode' - I didn't care: this was an important symbol of our love, and I didn't want that symbol to

be something that was carefully calculated, economically sensible, but possibly a meagre representation of something that was far from meagre - my purchase of that engagement ring was a response to love.

And so it was for Mary. Her actions were an outpouring of abundance and extravagance in response to, and in her best attempt to mirror, all that she recognised Jesus is and was to be. How much was too much for the one who was about to sacrifice it all for us?

So today, do we say with our lives and actions, "Here's my carefully portioned-out and measured response." For a gift of infinite worth, do we metaphorically respond with, "Thank you, here's a tenner?" Or do we instead respond to God's abundance for us with our own abundant responses, as we say in this service, as living sacrifices, giving it all, giving extravagantly, recognising perhaps that to onlookers this may even seem reckless.

And this is the tragedy of Judas's position - his objections and the meagre nature of his response show us that there's something about Jesus that he doesn't fully understand. There's something about the nature of Jesus and what he's prepared to do for us that Judas can't 'get' and there's a depth of Jesus's love that he, for whatever reason, hasn't been able to fathom or accept.

So two ways to live. One that responds in abundance and extravagance to Jesus' own abundant, extravagant and at times seemingly reckless love or one that has the apparent cover of common sense and prudence but ultimately is a diminished and meagre response to all that we have been given and the love poured out for us.

To use the words of Jesus to be our guide and encouragement today, Jesus said, *"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."*

## Reading Texts

John 12:1-8

<sup>1</sup> Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup> There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. <sup>3</sup> Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. <sup>4</sup> But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, <sup>5</sup> 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' <sup>6</sup> (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) <sup>7</sup> Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.' <sup>8</sup> You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'