

Lent 5 – 9am St Aidan’s – 13<sup>th</sup> March 2016

Theme: ‘The joy of giving’

John 12:1-8 ‘Jesus anointed at Bethany by Mary’

### Introduction

We are moving closer to the Easter events as we go deeper into Lent. In our Lectionary reading we move from Luke’s journeying to John’s Gospel for this week and have the simple, yet complex story, of Jesus having his feet anointed by Mary and the outrage this brought on several levels. Some we can understand, other aspects are lost a little to us due to time and a different cultural setting to our own.

The setting is a dinner in Jesus’ honour in the home of Lazarus, along with his two sisters, Mary and Martha. Naturally this is a celebration for all that Jesus had done for that household, with the raising of Lazarus. However this act is not mentioned, only assumed. We also have the two sisters in there very different roles. Martha, the organiser, the ‘doer’, catering for the needs of her guests and in particular Jesus. Mary, the reflector, the one who sits at the feet of Jesus, listening and then doing a most amazing thing for Jesus, which was scorned upon by specifically Judas, but no doubt others.

### Let us look closer at this account from John 12:1-8

While we have the setting, which we have already looked at, there are three key players in these few verses, Mary, Jesus and Judas.

It is the spontaneous actions of Mary towards Jesus that raises all the questions and discussions. How spontaneous we are unsure of because she has brought out a pint of nard oil, a very expensive perfume, made from the nard plant, which we learn probably cost a year’s wage. Possibly in today’s terms anything from \$60-100,000 dollars if you take the average wage in Canberra.

This unexpected action must have taken Jesus by surprise. Also her actions of anointing his feet with the highly aromatic perfume and wiping his feet with her hair was an action of complete servitude and gratefulness. Culturally, this was an action that would have been frowned upon. A woman doing this to a man who was simply a friend and not kin or not wedded to was culturally taboo.

In our first Bible Study for Lent in the booklet ‘Refreshed by Grace’ the Rev Dr Ian Price reminded us of ‘prevenient grace’. That is God’s grace that ‘comes before’ we even recognise it for ourselves. It is grace that is present that is there even though we do not know it, working behind the scenes, preparing the way, calling us on. It often comes unexpectedly to us in the form of some-one doing something totally unexpected and beautiful for us. It is part of God showing love, grace, in totally unexpected ways and in the gift of Jesus himself to all people. Here, in Mary’s actions we have this unexpected love revealed. We also have the preparation of Jesus for his own death and burial which is only a short time away. In a sense, this action of Mary, is the precursor to preparing Jesus’ body for burial. Nard was often one of the perfumes used to hide the smell of a decaying body, prior to burial, in Jesus’ time because it had such a strong and sweet smelling aroma. What a costly, beautiful act that Mary performs out of gratitude towards Jesus. He must have been truly touched by her actions towards him. Suddenly the future is now. Mary is the one who sits at the feet of Jesus and listens. She gets it. Unlike the disciples she knows what lies in store for Jesus. He is going to die. Mary anoints Jesus for his funeral while he is still alive and can enjoy the thick, rich perfume with him.

### Jesus’ response to Judas

However, reality and opposition quickly returns in the form of words from Judas, who in only a few days' time will betray Jesus.

Judas condemns Mary's wanton act of extravagance and asks why the perfume wasn't sold and the money given to the poor. The aside here is interesting in that it states that Judas' question was only because he couldn't get his hands on this money and not because he cared for the poor.

In response to this criticism of Mary, Jesus takes time to quote a portion of Deuteronomy 15:11 – *“Since there will never cease to be some in need (or the poor) on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land.’”*

Some people think when the gospel quotes Jesus as saying that we will always have the poor amongst us that this suggests there is no use in trying to work against poverty since we will never fully solve that problem in our world. But that actually ignores what Jesus was saying. Only part of Deuteronomy 15:11 was spoken by Jesus in John 12:8 but the people of that day knew the whole quote and what Jesus was saying to them. It was common for a teacher/rabbi to use purely part of a quote and expected the people to remember where it was from and what the full text was as it was part of the Jewish law which was well known. We need to remember this context and not to take Jesus' words out of context. The point he is making here is that he will not always be with them and this has been a beautiful act of preparation for what is to come. Also inherent in this is that 'money cannot solve all problems' and acts of kindness and generosity are to be encouraged. Wonderful and amazing acts of kindness are things that stay with us all our life and we are called to sometimes spontaneously simply do these things.

One writer put it in these terms.

'Why do we have such beautiful flowers at a funeral but fail to give flowers to the person who has died when they are alive? Wouldn't it be much more appropriate to show love and generosity to the living, rather than to the dead?

It is like having the good china in the cupboard and never getting it out to share its beauty with others. We think it is too good to use.'

An interesting quote as we think of the actions of Mary to Jesus.

Generosity, no strings attached – that is amazing love! It reflects the love of God, through Christ, for us.

### Conclusion

What a story about life and death. About living and sharing and about the darkness that some people try to hide behind with questions that make us feel guilty.

As we come towards Easter, we are called to be generous of heart, mind and soul as we follow Christ. On occasions this may seem like the wastefulness of Mary as she poured that expensive nard all over Jesus' feet and filled that home with the sweetness of that perfume. May we have that generosity of heart and may we experience that generosity of heart as we follow Jesus as our Lord and Saviour.

### Prayer

Lord Jesus, we walk with you towards your cross during these days of Lent. How strange is this path for us, how against our natural inclination. We live in a land that values success, in an economy that seeks pleasure, within a morality that believes not much is worth dying for. The way of the cross does not come naturally to us.

Nor does the generosity shown by Mary towards Jesus come easily. Teach us that your path may well be costly personally but also there is love and generosity along the way revealed sometimes quite unexpectedly. Give us grace to love you more dearly O God, and to follow Jesus, our Lord, more faithfully. Amen.