

Costly Perfume

Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year C, 6th April 2025

St Leonard's Denmark, Alison Kershaw

John 12.1-8

Through the written word and the spoken word may we know your Living Word, Jesus Christ our Saviour, Amen

Last week we explored the parable of the prodigal son – who wasted his inheritance, yet was welcomed home by his father who was equally extravagant - but in the outpouring of love and forgiveness. We celebrated our “spendthrift lover who never counts the cost”ⁱ and bids us to love so ‘recklessly’ in return.

We continue this theme in the powerful account of Mary who “took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair.” (John 12.1-8) All four gospels contain a version of this story with significant variations. Mark and Matthew are very similar – the act takes place shortly before Jesus’ death in Bethany in the house of Simon the Leper. A nameless woman anoints Jesus’ head with an entire alabaster jar of very expensive perfume and is rebuked by those present – in Matthew it is the disciples – for this wastage. Luke’s account takes place in the house of Simon the Pharisee toward the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, and is the only version to identify the woman as a sinner, and the only one where she washes his feet with her tears and kisses them before anointing with perfume. In Luke the scandal is not the extravagance when money might have been given to the poor but the sort of woman who Jesus had allowed to touch him. In art and popular imagination this woman is often assumed to be Mary Magdalene but that is inaccurate – she was not a ‘fallen woman’ but was cured of her demons, and became a follower of Jesus – but that is another story ...

Each version contains details to be reflected on, but today we concentrate on John’s account which resembles Matthew and Mark in being linked to Jesus’ imminent death, but has in common with Luke the woman anointing Jesus’ feet instead of his head and wiping them with her hair. John, however, is the only one to give the woman a name, identifying her as Mary of Bethany – the sister of Lazarus whom Jesus had raised from the dead, and in whose house the encounter takes place. This is the same Mary who, according to Luke, sat and listened at Jesus’ feet while he soothes her resentful busy sister, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things, but few things are needed—indeed only one. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.” (Luke 10.38-42) These roles are reprised in John’s gospel as we see Martha serving and Mary at Jesus’ feet.

Mary again appreciates what is going on in this moment. She sees how Jesus is placed and acknowledges what no-one else seems to be able to accept at this critical turning point as the authorities grow increasingly tense about the energy surrounding Jesus – he is about to suffer the terrible consequences of his controversial ministry. She alone seems to know that Jesus is about to give his life, that God is emptied out in giving, that love is poured onto the ground and into our hearts. And so her response is in kind. While it was a common act of hospitality to have servants wash a visitor’s feet, and a special honour to then apply perfume – we presume it was not common to use a whole jar, or a pound of costly pure nard, while the act of wiping with hair to seems to be unheard of – and even in our time and place it remains shocking.

Shocking because Mary humbles herself, shocking because she uses such costly perfume without stinting and shocking because it is so intimate – Mary gives her whole body to the task – her knees, her hands and her loosened hair. The sensuality of the scene may also take us aback. John tells us “the house was filled with perfume” – what does nard or spikenard smell like? Native to the Himalayas, it is – “very deep, rich, earthy and woody,” sometimes described as “subtly animalistic.” Mary’s action goes to our heart as sensate beings. Nard is used therapeutically to calm and relax,ⁱⁱ so Mary’s ministering to Jesus is one of deep compassion and tenderness. Perhaps she, alone among the gathered company, senses the fear that grips her friend and teacher.

Anointing is associated with many things – healing, honouring, or appointing a chosen one such as a king. Perhaps all of these are also implied in Mary’s beautiful act but Jesus draws attention to another purpose – preparation for burial. The disciples have been reluctant to accept Jesus talking of his death – they still hope for the triumphant Messiah - but Mary understands what is happening. Aside from Judas’ hypocrisy and ulterior motive, the objection

that the money might have been given to the poor shows that the point has been missed. Jesus' response "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me" is obviously not about Jesus being egotistical or mean to the poor – but shines the light on Mary's perceptive response to the fact that before long it will not be possible to hear or to touch the Word made flesh and dwelling amongst them. It also shows the boundless nature of her love – and it is out of that inexhaustible store that the poor, who are with us still, will be raised up. God's common purse will not run out.

So, let us now dwell, on the emotions that arise in us when we reflect on this scene and on the ministration received and offered. What might we open our hearts to experience, give, and accept?

Let us first go back to that woody, earthy scent that fills the house – and consider how the world ministers to us. It fills me with wonder that we are healed and revived by the scents, oils, and ointments gleaned from plants. But also, without any effort of extraction, we can simply be mindful of the world around us. We can, for instance, stand in a wet forest and breathe it in. There is a word for that wonderful smell of earth after rain – *petrichor*. What a balm to the spirit it is after a hot and dry spell. Or we can seek out boronia in spring, or the sticky salty smell of the white star like flowers of dryandra on granite outcrops. Or we can take off our shoes and paddle in rivers or lakes, or submerge our whole bodies in the sea. In our Lent discussion group we keep coming back to the theme of the Word, the universal or cosmic Christ – present before the world began, incarnate in Jesus, and in rising, filling all things. Let us breathe that mystery in, and let the world minister to us. And let us bring the gifts of this world to one another – filling rooms with bunches of herbs, freshly made cake, or some other delight we have picked up on our morning walk – gifts to heal, bring joy, and perhaps mark the sacred transitions of life and death.

Now, let us consider how else we minister to one another. First, we need to recognise the moment, and act in the moment, not let it pass. How often do we wish we had said the thing, or made the effort that would have made the difference, or even changed an outcome for someone. Revd. Sue makes the beautiful point that Mary also did what was best for herself – “in the face of impending death and separation she took the moment to do what she could and in tenderly anointing Jesus she may also have anointed her own heart and ignited the flame that would burn beyond this moment. Sorrow and absence but no regrets when you have loved well. No remorse at having betrayed him, as Judas will experience; no shame and grief at having denied him, as Peter will; and no sense of missing the moment, as will many other disciples.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Secondly, Mary's is a wordless gift. She sees, she knows, she touches. It is a gift to simply be with someone who needs someone. We don't have to offer advice, unless it is sought, we don't have to think of things to say, which may come across as empty clichés. But we do need to be there – at the table, by the cross, at the tomb, in the garden of resurrection.

And lastly, though there are many other aspects to explore, there is the grace to receive the care and love of another. Jesus opens his heart to Mary and defends her against those who have missed the moment. Perhaps think on this, next time you go to automatically bat someone away with – ‘no, no, I'm fine’ – or ‘that's too much.’ In accepting what is offered we help to realise the moment that makes love tangible.

Is Mary anticipating – or as a few people have tentatively asked, - just maybe inspiring Jesus' final teaching to his disciples to wash one another's feet as he had washed theirs? We are to be loving servants of one another – giving and receiving - keeping watch through times of darkness and fear – soothing fearful hearts, creased brows, and aching feet – filling the room with our love gifts no matter the cost.

ⁱ *A spendthrift lover is the Lord* (hymn) by Thomas Henry Troeger

ⁱⁱ *Spikenard Essential Oil*, Aromaweb. <https://www.aromaweb.com/essential-oils/spikenard-essential-oil.php>

ⁱⁱⁱ Sue Lodge-Calvert, *Opening our Hearts and Minds*. Blog for Lent 5 C 2025

(<https://www.companionsontheway.com/post/lent-five-opening-our-hearts-and-minds>)