

Year C Lent 5 – Passion Sunday

Isaiah 43: 16-21

Philippians 3:4b – 14

John 12:1-8

Making sense of emptying the Bottle

Extraordinary and extravagant love.... Words Bishop Kevin of Glasgow and Galloway used on Thursday at the funeral of Rev Ruth Innes. And words I can use today as we look at Mary's actions at the feet of Jesus.

If we had been in the room with Jesus and Lazarus and Lazarus' two sisters, Mary and Martha, when Mary poured out the spikenard perfume over Jesus's feet, our senses would have been assailed by a strong aroma. Spikenard oil comes from the plant called *Nardostachys jatamansi*, a member of the honeysuckle family. It has an earthy aroma, also described as musky, woody, musty and spicy. On that hot day in Bethany, the essential oils in the perfume would have been released quickly and would have powerfully hung in the air. And Mary tipped the **whole** contents of the bottle over Jesus' feet. It was definitely an extraordinary and extravagant gesture of love that Mary made for our Lord.

Mary had the reputation for being a quiet, reflective, sensitive soul whilst her sister Martha was the busy active one. And yet, here Mary was being active, being committed, and also provocative and shocking in her actions. For apart from using a whole bottle of expensive perfume, Mary showed her love of our Lord by touching his feet. No big deal you might think, but in that culture, for a single woman to physically touch a man was just not done. Mary anointed Jesus' feet with the perfume – this probably underplays what she did. She most likely rubbed the perfume into his feet, a form of soothing foot massage. Very definitely against the cultural norms, and all the more loving for that.

Mary's actions were definitely 'of the moment'. I think I can appreciate how this most loving act unfolded in her mind. She responded to the love and ministry of Jesus in that moment. She responded with an extraordinary and

extravagant act, without hesitation, and without weighing up the cost of that action.

Mary was caught up in the moment and knew what the right thing to do was. She did not let her rational self thwart the extravagant loving act. She just did it, without hesitation. If she had hesitated, weighed up the cost of the perfume against the loving impulse of generosity and extravagance, this story would probably have been different, a non-story. Mary may never have shown her love and appreciation for Jesus at all, and the meal would have passed off without the insights we now gain from its telling.

I don't know about you, but I know the internal dialogues I can have in my mind over generosity versus my rational weighing up of the pros and cons of any action. In retrospect I know that Jesus was in my impulsive generosity far more than in the rational weighing up of pros and cons. When I am offered something as an opportunity, I know from the response of my heart whether a 'yes' should leap out from my mouth, and yet.... Sometimes my rational mind kicks in and I start to process and rationalise the situation. I am then far more likely to say 'no'. How often have I disappointed God in such situations I can hardly start to imagine? I wonder if that has also been your experience?

My experience has been that when I have said 'yes', without doing the rational thinking, all sorts of wonderful things happen. It is as if once committed, providence carries me along and I gain as much as I give. However, I still seem to have to learn that lesson of life, time and time again; to not always let the rational mind start over-thinking, the mind that puts all sorts of 'ifs' and 'buts' in the way of the response of my heart, instead letting my head rule my heart. Learning to live and love generously, without always counting the cost of actions is, for me, a lifetime's struggle.

In our gospel story the rational mind is represented by the person of Judas. Let us ignore the comment about him being a thief, who misappropriated funds from the common purse – that seems to be a spiteful comment based on his later betrayal of Jesus. The rational mind, represented by Judas objects to the perfume being used, pointing out how the sale of it could have helped the poor.

Jesus rebukes Judas – the rational mind – because Mary had responded with love, in the moment. It was a beautiful, extravagant, act of love.

When we respond with that type of generous love in a situation before us; without hesitation, reservation, or rational calculation of its worth, we are serving Jesus just as much as the situation before us. When we show such love of God through our loving action, we are part of God's grace, in the here and now.

And in the world just now, we sorely need acts of generous extravagant love.

Mary had that bottle of spikenard perfume stored away. I wonder when and for what purpose she had originally intended to use it? I wonder how she knew in the spur of the moment what she had to do with it?

I will leave you with an example that humbled me. One wet and cold Edinburgh afternoon, a shivering homeless person was sitting on the pavement. The person I was with, instinctively took off her expensive waterproof coat, and gave it to the homeless person to wear. No calculation of the cost of the coat, no calculation of whether the homeless person might sell this desirable coat to buy drink or drugs. She just acted with generous and extravagant love, in the moment. That seemed to me to be serving Christ our Lord when God showed us the homeless person. To my embarrassment, I was doing the rational calculation, not giving and loving generously.

In our lives, I wonder what our equivalence is of the bottle of costly perfume, that we have stored away, possibly intended for a specific future purpose, or for an unspecified 'rainy day'? I wonder what it would take for each one of us to act with generous love and be willing to break open our bottle and empty it out?

On this Passion Sunday, as we prepare to celebrate the sacred mysteries of the coming Holy Week and Christ's Passion, let us recall that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son (John 3:16). Let us also recall that Jesus emptied himself out for all of humankind, to show us God's love, grace and mercy, just as that bottle of perfume was emptied out over His feet.

In our lives, may we be guided to follow the example of Jesus, and of Mary,
that we may find ways to love generously, in the name of and in the service of
Christ our Lord.

Loving and generous God,
Speak to our hearts,
That we may listen and respond,
With extraordinary love,
With extravagant love.
We ask your forgiveness when we calculate the cost
And choose to do nothing.
May we find ways to empty our 'bottle of nard'
With generosity and joy,
For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.