

Sermon preached by Revd Ross Fishburn

St Paul's Canterbury

Lent 5C

Sunday 3 April 2022

John 12: 1-11

The Anointing at Bethany

In John's gospel, it's always best not to take things at first sight. Things may well not be as they seem, or more to the point, they may be **more** than they seem. The ones with true insight in John the Evangelist's world are those who look to the deeper significance of things, rather than the mere surface appearance. So it is in this extraordinary incident of the anointing at Bethany. Judas, the apostolic treasurer, is both less than he seems and also more; he doesn't pick up the true significance of what is happening, and yet he is *more* than the treasurer, he is a thief as well, says John. So poor deluded and short sighted Judas sees the pouring out of this precious ointment as an affront to the mission of Jesus – it's a right royal waste of money, *for this perfume could have been sold for 300 denarii and the money given to the poor*, he says. Judas sees this in terms of what the money might do for the poor (or indeed for poor him!) and misses what is really going on, what is happening at a deeper level. For the point of this incident is not simply in the offering itself, significant and magnificent as that is, but that it is a **symbolic action**, acting out something which shows God to us, and pointing to something of the character of what God is about to do in Jesus.

What happens here is really quite unusual. The common practice of having the feet of the guests washed on arrival is escalated as it is the sister of the host who does the work not the servants, and then its escalated several levels more as the washing is done with perfumed ointment not with water, and then again when Mary dries his feet with her hair. This is three times unusual,

bordering on the scandalous. And how odd is it for this average Palestinian family to have such a costly ointment in it that Judas can value at 300 *denarii*, which makes it worth 300 days wages for the average person of the time. To even have such valuable stuff much less to use it with such profligate generosity is exceptional.

But of course Judas has missed the point. Mary's action is applauded by Jesus, not as a right royal waste of money, but as an offering in preparation for his burial. This is not *waste* but *worship*. Mary is making a costly offering of love and gratitude to the one who has raised her brother Lazarus from the dead. She gives him an *extravagant* gift in an *extravagant way* as she follows the pouring out of the costly perfumed ointment with a gesture which is both *socially risky* and quite *intimate in manner*. But of course its significance is not simply in the act itself, but also in the reality to which it points. Love and gratitude are poured out by Mary as she pours that ointment, extravagantly, without reservation and without qualification, and this is a sign of the Lord of Love in whose presence they stand. Jesus makes the connection for them and for us by pointing to the burial which is on the horizon of his story and his awareness. This anointing is as if for the day of his burial, Jesus says. This *physical* pouring out of the perfumed oil is a preparatory sign of the greater pouring out of an offering of love: God's love poured out on the cross as Jesus' own life is offered completely, without reservation and without qualification for the redeeming of the world, and that all might be drawn to God. Of course everything in John's gospel points to this culmination of the story, the point where Jesus sent by the father for the love of the world, loves his own until the end, and is lifted up for the their life and salvation.

Judas is working in the world's way, in which he judges things with himself at the centre of things, and in the economy of cash, of value, and of usefulness. In that economy, what Mary does is

scandalous, for it wastes money which could have been better used for other purposes, it transgresses the principle of value and proportion, and gives a gift which cannot be repaid, which cannot be retrieved, which in Judas's eyes cannot be reciprocated or receive appropriate response.

But of course that's half the point. In God's way of working gifts are given which cannot fully be repaid, which are out of all proportion. They are given not in a cycle of reciprocation, but in a flow of pure gift. The gift which this symbolic act looks towards is pure gift: the gift of God's love poured out on the cross for the life and the healing of the world. Mary has experienced a preview of that in the raising of her brother Lazarus. She has received the precious gift of her brother's life given back, and she has seen God's life-giving power at work in Jesus, and in so seeing and receiving, she has found herself caught up in God's economy: the generous and unstinting love which is at the very heart of God's being and acting. From that glimpse she acts in her own turn, she lives out of God's generosity more than her own in what she does here. She wants to be part of that flow of gift.

I think that is what's at stake for us as we receive and rehearse this story in the church's life. This is not simply a sign pointing to who Jesus is, and a sign of the generous even profligate nature of God's love in Christ (though of course it is that), it is *also a call to us to follow Mary into the experience of that love*. If we have seen something of God's life-giving love as Mary did, then we are called not merely to see, but to know for ourselves, and to be caught up in that cycle and economy of generous love, which is prepared to pour out ourselves, without reservation and qualification.

This speaks to us about our worship of God. It calls us not to see it the way Judas does, in terms of what it does for us, but rather in the pattern of Mary, in terms of how it speaks of our love of God and how we join in that movement of generous love. It's so

easy in today's world to see our worship mainly in terms of our enjoyment of it, or what it does for us, how good it makes us feel, or how it supports and nurtures us. That isn't to say it won't have these by-products, but if these are the principle focus of our worship then we have made the mistake of Judas, and we become mere consumers of worship. Indeed if we saw it in terms only of its by products we could value worship as the world often does, as a *right royal waste of time*. What we need to do is see our worship as an offering to God, an offering of the time, the energy, the talent, the love and all that it costs us to make worship happen. We offer it not because of what it does for us, rather we give our worship to God as the heart's offering of those who know something of God's love, and would like to know more. We want to be part of that movement of gift. We worship God because we yearn for God, and want to be caught up like Mary in God's life and being.

We may not have any jars of ointment worth 300 denarii in our kitchen cupboards, even metaphorically. We may feel that who we are and what we have isn't worth much. But that's not the point. The point is to be caught up in the economy of offering, because life in God's service is a web of gift and a network of exchange.