

LENTEN STUDY 6 John 12: 1-8

It was a thankyou celebration dinner for Lazarus' miraculous restoration to life. Here was Lazarus, present at table, who, a few days earlier, was dead and 'stinketh.' Now, he stinketh no more, but eateth heartily and sitteth under his fig tree again. Jesus lodged with his family, with Mary and Martha, in his last earthly week. Bethany was always a quiet, hospitable oasis of peace and calm. In the midst of the ugliness of the evil scheming and hostility against Jesus, common women folk like Mary and Martha offered hospitality to Jesus-on-the-run.

The dinner scene is very like Anne Frank's family celebrating a last Chanukah in their secret room; joy and foreboding sit together at table. Mary knew that raising Lazarus meant a death sentence for Jesus. His snatching Lazarus' life back from the grave's maw threatened the religious leaders, for, "on account of him, many Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus." (John 12:11) Seized with murderous intent, they are now only a few kilometres away in Jerusalem, and they want Jesus dead. Mary knew that the boots of the enemy could kick in the door tonight. She considers that his fate is already a done deal. She must seize one of the few remaining moments of Jesus' life. If she does not make a move now, she won't get a second chance.

Sourced from far away India, Mary has an alabaster jar of pure nard. It is ludicrously expensive at over 300 denarii or a year's salary. It is used by the wealthy as perfume for the neck and wrists, and by the poorer people as a burial ointment. How came she by it? An urgent call to Jesus went out a short while before, "Lord, he whom you love is ill" Jesus told his disciples, "This illness does not lead to death. It is for God's glory and so that the Son of man may be glorified through it."

Mary may have had the nard to anoint her sick brother, Lazarus, but she held off because Jesus would come to heal him, wouldn't he? Even after her brother's death, and he had to be entombed before dusk, she held off anointing Lazarus, because Jesus would come to revive him, wouldn't he? Suddenly, decay set in, too quickly to anoint now, and the tomb was sealed. When he did arrive, "Jesus wept." Why? He really loved Lazarus, but the fatal cost is, if he restores Lazarus, he will certainly sign his own death warrant, for the nasties had already said "It is better for one man to die.."

The evening has progressed. Mary knelt before Jesus to give a token of love to the Christ who had given real tokens of love to her and to her family. *She had been here on her knees before.* For three years Jesus had borne the brunt of criticism from the religious pundits, the fault-finding Pharisees. Now the gloves were off as they had declared him outlaw. He was nearly driven to distraction by his male disciples who were doggedly slow to come to full belief and insight. After three years, all they could argue was, "If he's going up to Jerusalem to become king, what's in it for us?" as they fought for power and place in his would-be kingdom. He had been run ragged by the constant call of the madding crowd's insistent clamour. And he was mentally wrestling with "am I really the Messiah, the Suffering Servant, called to die as a model for the people?" Drained by what seemed a fruitless ministry, he crashed emotionally. His whole being was convulsed with an inner battle to bend his human will to God's calling. Utterly exhausted, Jesus had come to the home of Mary and Martha, where he had always found rest and repose before. He was like a beast at the abattoir, he could smell his own death closing in. He shook with nervous fear, as any one on death-row would, at the thought of a Roman scourging that would flay the skin from his back and drain litres of blood, and

then to suffer the excruciating agony of the cross, the most cruel death by intense pain and asphyxiating death imaginable. Desperately he sought someone with whom he could unburden his unpeace, to confirm and encourage him in his redemptive role. And there was Mary, his intelligent, sensitive disciple.

Immediately she saw his sorry mental state, she perceived Jesus' heart was crying out for consoling compassionate companionship. He needed a patient, understanding listener, who, with loving support, could help to soothe his restless sea and encourage him on to redeem us all. As an attentive, meditative, receptive, reticent confidante, keen not to miss a final word, Mary, in an extraordinary breaking with social convention, *knelt at his feet*. She suspended all activity to listen, to focus fully on the other. Wordlessly, she nodded quiet comprehension and confirmation of his calling as he tumbled forth his fears, helped him to see more clearly the necessary way before him, and so began to empower him to take the dreaded road to Calvary. Martha had given him time-honoured hospitality; Mary had recognized a greater call to ministry and had "entertained angels unawares." (Heb.11:2)

Tonight, Mary did not only kneel, she acted out an anointing. She said in effect, "I would like to introduce Jesus the Suffering Servant Son of God. He has given me an opportunity to sit at his feet. I would like to cherish him for a fragrant moment before the sewage of hatred and violence washes over him and carries him away." The old Brylcreem ad used promise that, to get rich, creamy, manageable, wavy hair "a little dab'll do ya." With love's extravagance, in an act of incredible loveliness, Mary poured a *whole* alabaster *jar* of costly perfumed oil over Jesus' feet. She poured out the oil as if he were a corpse already, so much that "the house was filled with the fragrance." She poured herself out in love for Jesus as he will pour out himself for her on Calvary. Her act anticipates his act; her love is a foreshadowing of his love. Many centuries before, Samuel poured holy oil on the head of a shepherd boy, David, to make him King of Israel. Now Mary of Bethany was doing the same. She was too humble to pour the oil on his head, so she poured it on his feet. She was saying, "I believe you are our king and I want to help you to claim your kingship by taking on those hostile men and showing them that you can still love and forgive them as they hurt you." Her secondary message was, "Jesus, you are as good as a corpse already," hence Jesus' rebuff to Judas' parsimony, "Leave her alone. She has kept this for my burial." She had earlier encouraged her Lord to go to the Holy City; now, she prepares him for death there.

Mary has a second shock for the gawping watchers. Unselfconsciously, almost shamelessly, seeming unaware of anyone but Jesus, caring nought for the niceties of the day, she did the unthinkable as lovers in love may do. She openly expressed her love for him. Mary had poured out a year's salary on a corpse who isn't a corpse yet. Now, she does what is only done behind a married couple's door, because her actions are unambiguously loving. She *let down her hair* in front of Jesus' male disciples. As she leans down to work the perfume into the bare skin of Jesus' feet, she used her hair in place of a cloth, a really-in-your-face-gesture. Now she, too, smells like an anointed corpse. She seems to be casting her lot in with her lover "until death us do part."

Mary's love gave all. She took the most precious thing she possessed and *poured it all out* on Jesus. Her only regret was that she had no more to give. Her love was sacrificial in the words of David, "I will not offer to the Lord my God that which has cost me nothing." (2 Sam. 24:24)

Mary's lavish devotion contrasts with Judas' critical stinginess. Judas shows a horrible example of a mind blinded by covetousness and yet pretend godliness. He is the very opposite of Mary giving abundantly when she filled the house with fragrance; Judas filled the house with the stink of his contemptuous self-interest. He is so jealous because he cannot do what Mary can. Both prepare Jesus for burial; Mary by anointing and Judas by betrayal. As a con-man, Judas knew Jesus' soft spot, his concern for the poor. He knew where to stick his jab. Piously insincere, he whined "Why was this perfume not sold...and the money given to the poor?" This was the very opposite of Mary's extravagant love. Judas only saw the issue in terms of scarcity of commodities. Mary foreshadowed Jesus giving his all on the Cross. The oil wasn't his, but he expected Jesus to praise him for his prudence. Judas made a big deal of how much the perfume cost and caused Mary no little embarrassment. He made it all sound so pious, when he was the group treasurer whose fingers were often in the till. Judas will betray Jesus' feet for thirty pieces of silver, a far less price than that which Mary spent to anoint them. (Perhaps this is the vicar holding up the offertory: "Regardless of what we say of Thee, this is what we truly think of Thee." or, "The parson views the collection plate; it puts him right out of sorts, for his best preached effort got a penny for his thoughts.") Jesus averred, "Mary has done a beautiful thing. I tell you, wherever the Good News is preached, what she has done will be told in memory of her." (Matt. 26:13) Jesus didn't support his suggestion. Was it Jesus' rebuke this night that tipped Judas into betrayal?

Where are we? Mary worshipped by action. Do we meet for Sunday Eucharist and find no worship happens and we go away feeling disappointed, unchanged; "Oh, it was the sermon or the music to blame?" Mary was extravagant and lavish in her giving. Do we offer a 'sacrifice?' The sermon was on 'acceptance;' our hearts hardened as we mentally chanted "Turn the refugee boats around!" We were asked to lay our special and uniquely wonderful gift, talent, endowment at the service of the Church, but our mind is chanting "I have no time. I don't like doing that. I won't feel comfortable. I can't be bothered. That would inconvenience my bowls or the Ancient Order of Buffalos." Have we ever had the perfume/gift to anoint a *dead situation* in our life and refused to do it? We may not have expected a draining illness, a divorce or financial crisis; we prayed half-heartedly for cure, but no rescue came, so we *still have the perfume* unused. Are our thoughts ever like Judas'? "Why are we restoring this old church when there are people starving?" "The parish meal! (or whatever) What a waste! Look what we could have done with the money."