

## A Gift of Love

Message for the Fifth Sunday of Lent: *Based on John 12: 1 - 8*

*Gracious Lord, open our eyes to see you, our ears to hear you,  
our hearts to know you and our minds to understand you. Amen*

Our story from the gospel of John finds Jesus in Bethany, safe at the home of his dear friends, siblings Martha, Mary and Lazarus. In John's version of this story, the officials of the synagogue had given orders that anyone who knew of Jesus' whereabouts was to report it, so he could be arrested. So, Jesus must have been aware that his time was coming close, and he was taking refuge at the home of his good friends. And they were giving him a dinner party. We know this family from other bible references, and we know Jesus loved them. Lazarus, the friend whom Jesus cried over when he heard he had died and then raised him from the dead; Mary, who loved to sit at Jesus' feet and listen to Jesus' teachings; and Martha, sensible, down to earth Martha, again in today's story we find Martha doing what she does best for her special guest and all his friends, being an adept hostess and serving Jesus and his disciples. And Mary is not helping Martha in this story either. Mary is once again at Jesus feet, this time she's washing them -- with nard no less! -- almost a year's wages of expensive perfume, and for heaven's sake, using her hair to wipe it off! Well, yes, in those days it was considered good hospitality to have one's guests' feet washed when they came to visit, but this behavior was most definitely over the top!

So what is it about nard that makes it so remarkable? My research indicates that it is actually a herb, a member of the valerian family (some of you may have heard about valerian, it's still used today as a sleep aid). It is the root of the plant that is used in the making of nard. In biblical times nard was grown in the foothills of the Himalayas and then went to Persia for processing, where the essential oil was extracted and the thick amber-coloured pure oil was used either as an oil or was made into an ointment. No wonder it was such an extremely expensive and very special substance.

A version of this story of Jesus being anointed by a woman is also in Mark and Matthew, but it was his head that was anointed, in John's version Jesus' feet are being anointed and wiped off with Mary's hair. In Mark and Matthew's rendition, all the disciples complained about the "waste" of the expensive nard. In today's story from John's gospel, just Judas is complaining about the unnecessary extravagance of Mary's gesture. John is pointing to Judas in this way to describe his character as 'the bad guy' which sets him up, as it were, for his role later in John's description of the crucifixion story.

So, looking at things from a completely practical angle, Judas actually had an excellent point --300 hundred denarii -- almost a year's wage for a non-skilled labourer. Think about that, in today's terms that would be, say, about \$25,000—that would feed a lot of poor and hungry people. But Jesus doesn't argue with Judas, instead he agrees! The poor will always need our concern and help, they will always be with us, but it was Jesus who would be leaving them, they would not always have him there with them. There would be time again soon enough to help those in need. And

Jesus also defends Mary and the giving of her gift, telling Judas to let her be, she bought the nard for him—it was hers to give after all, and she had been keeping it for the day of his burial. Once again, Jesus was telling the disciples, warning them, trying to prepare them for his upcoming death. Anointing with herbs and oils was part of the preparation of a body for burial<sup>1</sup>.

Ok, all well and good, Mary obviously could afford to give such a costly gift and wanted to do this for Jesus, but from a sensible standpoint, couldn't Mary have found an equally as nice yet less expensive perfume to use and then there still would be money to feed the poor? Just what is the point of this story of wild extravagance? We need to go back a bit before our story starts to put it into full context.

John places this story immediately after the rising of Lazarus, which caused many people to believe in Jesus, that Jesus was the Son of God. But even before Jesus raised Lazarus, both Mary and Martha declared that they knew he was the Messiah, the resurrection and the life (*John 11: 25*). Jesus tells them, because of their belief, they would see the glory of God in the raising of Lazarus. (*John 11: 40*). Now, Lazarus' resurrection incited the Jewish officials who found Jesus a threat to their very way of life as Jews. Jesus had to be killed -- John 11 vs 48-50: "If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation. ...it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." Jesus knew he was a marked man, and no longer walked about openly among the Jews (*John 11: 54*). He went to the house of his beloved friends in Bethany the week before the Passover Festival, the week before he knew he was to die. We can only speculate as to how much of the future Martha, Lazarus or Mary may have known. But we know they loved Jesus, and Jesus loved them. We know they knew Jesus was the Messiah—he who raised Lazarus, from the dead, Jesus, the man whom the authorities had marked as a political rebel, their deeply cherished friend, and he was the guest of honour at their house.

And honour him they did. True to her nature, Martha, using her gifts as organizer, cook and consummate hostess, gave a big dinner party, she served it and no doubt prepared or saw to the preparations of the meal for the crowd of guests. Mary, true to her nature, also gave of herself. In a gesture of humility and immense and extravagant love, in front of all their guests, took on the role of servant, unbound her hair—two things a woman did not do in good company--and washed Jesus feet with the wonderfully scented and incredibly expensive ointment, wiping them with her hair. It was more than just an anointing, Jesus understood what Mary was doing. He truly appreciated the depth of her devotion and love in this rather unorthodox manner. This was the man who brought her brother back to life, she owed him much and loved him so very deeply. Mary was expressing her complete and utter love, adoration and devotion to the one she knew to be her Lord and Saviour. How could she show her love? By giving him something she must have truly treasured. By putting herself in the position of the lowliest of servant by washing his feet, she is acknowledging to Jesus and all present that Jesus was Lord, and she was but his servant. By using her hair to wipe his feet, she gave her utter and complete love and devotion, she gave completely of herself to him. The sheer sensuality of this must have

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<sup>1</sup> Oxford Annotated bible, 169 NT

been overwhelming—unbinding her hair, washing his feet, the smell of the perfume. This was a totally selfless gift of love, to the one who was about to give his life in love for all. Mary was anointing him before his death. Jesus understood all the subtleties and nuances of Mary's admittedly dramatic gesture, even if Judas or the others didn't see the point of it all, didn't want to or maybe even felt uncomfortable about the tableau this must have presented. Jesus acknowledges Mary's gestures, and supports her to all present when the hard-hearted Judas questioned her motives. And I'll wager even the practical Martha understood Mary's totally selfless gift and expression of her love. Judas just didn't get it, he was blind to all but the money--although he had eyes, he could not, or maybe did not want to see.

Let me end in a prayer:

Gracious God, help us to really see,  
to look beyond the obvious, to see the giving love in others as Jesus would see it.

Almighty Creator, give us ears to hear your voice  
and turn a deaf ear to the words of those who try and twist the truth.

Generous and Loving Lord, help us to know, like Mary did, how to have hearts that are full of self-giving love;  
We, who have received so freely from you, want to return to you our love, just as selflessly.

Lord of all our lives; give us minds to really understand the amazing gift Jesus gave us.  
Help us to know how we can to give ourselves as fully and completely to Jesus,  
as Jesus gave himself for us, in true devotion and humility.

Thank you God, for every gift you have given us, and most of all for the gift beyond words,  
your son Jesus, our Saviour, to whom with you and the Holy Spirit be glory now and for all days.  
Amen

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