

A Gift Far Too Small

A sermon by Alison Sampson on John 12:1-8 and Philippians 3:4b-14
South Yarra Community Baptist Church, 13 March 2016

A friend of ours had been sick for a long, long time. He had multiple health problems; he had dementia; and he had been in a slow decline for years. After many dips and rallyings and further crises, it looked like the end. His wife called some very dear friends to let them know. They lived on the other side of the country, but they jumped on a plane and flew over to see him one last time. When they arrived, it was time to eat. Nobody felt like cooking, so they ordered Chinese takeaway.

When the meal came, his wife remembered that there was a bottle of Grange Hermitage—an extremely expensive wine—under the house. They had been given it many years ago, but had never found the right time to drink it. This, she decided, must be the time. Her husband was dying, their close friends were there to say goodbye. And so she crawled under the house and found the bottle, and brushed off the cobwebs and the dust. Then she fetched the hand blown Venetian wine glasses they had bought on their travels together. She carefully opened the bottle, and poured out the wine.

The friends sat around the sickbed, and drank to our friend's life. His wife propped up his head, and offered him some wine, and he drank, too. And then those who could, ate together, and told stories and laughed and cried, while he drifted in and out of sleep.

Cracking open a \$700 bottle of wine on someone's deathbed is pretty extravagant—but let's raise the stakes...What would you spend a year's wages on? A house deposit? A car? A university education?

How about some fabulously expensive perfume for a man about to die?

But in tonight's reading, that is exactly what Mary does. Jesus is visiting Mary and Martha, and their brother Lazarus, whom he has just raised from the dead. While the men are reclining at the table, Mary brings in an eye-wateringly expensive block of perfume, and uses it to anoint Jesus. And then, in John's gospel, she wipes Jesus' feet with her hair.

The disciples were shocked—we know this from the other gospels—but in John's account only Judas speaks out. "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" he asks. For the cost of the perfume was three hundred times a day's wage: in Australia today, that would be the equivalent of about \$50,000.

The gospel writer goes on to explain that Judas said this because he was a thief: he wanted the money so he could steal more from the common purse. But I reckon Judas gets a bum rap here. Because he's asking the question that the other disciples ask in Matthew's account and in Mark's; and he's asking the question that we would ask now. Fifty grand. That would go a long way in a homeless shelter, or in support of a family of asylum seekers. It would feed the hungry, heal the sick, educate the young. How on earth can it be okay for someone to spend so much on a single symbolic act?

I don't think we can come close to understanding unless we take a step back. In the previous chapter of John, we are told that Lazarus was ill. Word was sent to Jesus, but

although he loved the family, he stayed where he was for a few days more. And in his absence, Lazarus died. For Mary and Martha, this meant absolute disaster. Without their brother, without husbands, they had no way to live—no income, no access to the workforce, nothing.

When Jesus finally travelled to Bethany, he was met by Martha, Mary's sister. She said to Jesus, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." They talked and then Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who put their faith in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and puts their faith in me will never die. Do you put your faith in me?"

And Martha, who had nursed her brother on his sickbed and had watched him die and her future die with it, looked at Jesus and said, "Yes, Lord, I believe." Extraordinary woman. A little later in the story, Jesus called Lazarus out of the tomb. Lazarus emerged, "his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to the gathered crowd, "Unbind him, and let him go."" And we are given to understand that Lazarus was freed from the grave cloths, and brought back into the land of the living.

In tonight's reading, Jesus is back in Bethany, back at the home of Lazarus, and Lazarus is hosting a dinner on Jesus' behalf. And I'm not sure about you, but if my husband or main source of support had died, and if a friend had turned up a few days later, walked with me to the local funeral parlour, and brought him back home again, alive and well, able to sit at table and host a feast; and if that also meant that I wouldn't be forced into prostitution as the only way to survive;—well, I'd be pretty darn grateful! In fact, I can't think of what I wouldn't offer in thanksgiving. A car, a house, a bottle of \$50,000 perfume wouldn't begin to express my gratitude at having his life back, and with it, my own. And so in this light, Mary's extravagant anointing makes perfect sense.

The thing is, like all Scripture, the anointing at Bethany is not just a story about something that happened once upon a time with special people who knew the real, live Jesus. It is also a story for us, a story about the effect that following Jesus can have on our lives, here and now. But for many of us who have grown up in the Christian faith, and have perhaps never had a radical conversion or a feeling of salvation that we can clearly pinpoint, it can be really difficult to see just how following Jesus gives us life, let alone the sort of life that leads to the level of gratitude we see in Mary. And maybe, for some of us, it doesn't.

Because that is another strand of the same story. Judas objected to the squandering of perfume; and, leaving aside the question of whether he was a thief, I suspect most of us can recognise ourselves in him. Like Judas, we are followers of Jesus. We read the Scriptures, we listen to sermons, and we know that he cares about the poor and that his followers care about the poor, too. And it *is* outrageous to squander so much money on a single extravagant action. We know that the money could have been put to more sensible uses, uses that would still have served Jesus, but in far better ways.

So when Judas spoke, he was voicing our concerns and the concerns of all disciples of every place and time. Why would someone lavish so much on a single action? More than that, it was an action that was highly sensual, even lascivious—how could it possibly have been the right thing to do? If I were to kneel down after the service and wash some bloke's feet with my hair, I'd be hauled before the professional standards

board. And so in Judas's complaint I also hear the fear of Eros, the prurience which pervades the church. Mary's act is so intimate, and so utterly outrageous, that Judas cannot even name it, let alone criticise it; instead, he focusses on the money. He knows the right thing—that followers of Jesus care for the poor—and yet, he doesn't *know* Jesus. And it is in that loss, that failure, that his death lies. Judas may be eating and drinking, walking and talking, but he is already dead on his feet.

In the letter to the Philippians, Paul writes, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead." The word translated as 'know' here is a trap for us, for in our society we almost always think about 'knowing' as being familiar with information. Thus we think we know Christ, because we have memorised our Bible stories and listened to sermons and learned the right theology.

But there are wider ways of knowing. Both in Hebrew and English, 'knowing' can refer to sexual intimacy: to a form of communion that is beyond words; and the word can also be translated as 'experience'. And so in his letter to the Philippians, Paul is saying that he yearns for intimate communion with Christ. He's not saying that he wants to learn the right things—he already knows the right information. He's just told us that he was a perfect Pharisee who had memorised the law, and carried it out.

But he longs for more. He wants to *experience* Christ, so that he might also experience the resurrection from the dead. Paul is not seeking eternal life here, some magical insurance policy that means he will never die. Instead, he is seeking a radical coming alive, an awakening from the sleepwalking existence that is normal life. The existence which can speak good theology, and do the right thing, yet never experience or befriend God, let alone fall in love with God and with all that God loves in this world. Awakening out of this existence into full and abundant life—this is what Paul longs for.

And it is this form of knowing and resurrection that Mary already displays. She is not speaking the right words; she is not tithing her income; she is not committing to daily prayers. She is not engaged in the correct expressions of religious observance, and her outrageous actions—kneeling down on the floor, letting her hair down, and touching the feet of her guest—make it clear she thinks little even of the usual social niceties. But she *knows* Jesus, and she loves him. She knows him right down to his toenails, which she is wiping with her hair. She has already experienced him as the source of abundant life, and she is so grateful that she pours out everything: her passion, her physical caresses, her costly perfume.

She can afford to this because in God's economy, the economy Mary already knows, there is always more than enough. The sower doesn't just sprinkle a few seeds on the most fertile soil; instead, he throws handfuls of seed everywhere, even among the weeds and along the stony path. The teacher doesn't send the crowd away to find food; instead, he organises an impromptu feast for thousands, and feeds the birds with the abundant leftovers. Even the dead are bought back to life, and are returned to sit in communion at the table.

And it is because of this abundance, this never-ending supply of God's extravagant and eternal generosity, that we are raised out of death and into God's life: a life of gratitude, of loving, of belonging, out of which flows a life of service and a burning desire to participate in God's passionate concern for the world.

Every week we gather to be reminded of this abundance, and to live out this experiential way of knowing. We gather together around the table, for it is here that we are formed into the living body of Christ. When we break bread and share wine, we are not reminding ourselves of the facts of an historical episode. Instead, we are participating in the living reality which feeds our deepest hunger and hope, and when we experience it deeply, it will draw from us that same extravagant love that Mary shows to Jesus.

In the gospel reading, Mary gave up a fortune, and her dignity. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul writes that, for the sake of Christ, he has gladly lost everything. Earlier in the service, as we sang the great hymn by Isaac Watts, we declared that:

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

Would you offer up the whole realm of nature? Would you spend a year's wages? Would you kneel on the floor and wash the cracked and smelly feet of Jesus? What have you given to express your gratitude to the source of all life, all love, all courage, and all hope? What will you now give?Ω