
A Disciple's True Love

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 6 April 2025

Philippians 3:5b-14 • John 12:1-8



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

In today's reading from John's Gospel, Jesus is preparing to make his final journey to Jerusalem. It is just before the Passover. It is a time of final teaching and instructions to his disciples. He has travelled a long way with them and taught them many things, but the final lessons are yet to come.

Jesus has gone to Bethany where his friends Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha live. Lazarus is the man Jesus raised from the dead, after he had been lying in his tomb for four days. They are giving a dinner in his honour. We don't know the particular occasion, but the bond among the three siblings and Jesus is a strong one, and Jesus is of course their revered and loved teacher. As they recline at table, Mary, the sister who has always valued listening to Jesus above all things, again leaves the serving at table to her sister Martha, and sits

down at Jesus' feet. She opens a jar of pure nard, a fragrant perfume made from a plant called the spikenard, which originated in the Himalayas. Its aroma fills the room, as she pours about half a litre — on to Jesus' feet and begins to wipe them with her long hair. It is a very loving gesture on Mary's part. Not a romantic love — a true devotional love, for Mary has seen what Jesus is. Jesus is love. He has shown great love to her brother, to her sister and to herself.

Of course, this perfume, this nard, is a very expensive item, and Judas Iscariot complains that she has wasted it by pouring it out on Jesus' feet. We can perhaps sympathise with Judas' point of view. Although we doubt his sincerity, Judas says, quite truthfully, that it could have been sold for a good deal of money, which could be given to the poor and needy. We are told by St John that Judas used to steal from the money bag the disciples entrusted to him to carry, and that he didn't really care about the poor. But the point remains, and Jesus takes it seriously, saying, "You will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me" (John 12:8). Is this a shocking statement? Does it mean that Jesus does not care about the poor?

Let's look at a few points which arise from this little scene.

First, did Mary "waste" the expensive perfume by pouring such a lot of it onto Jesus' feet? We don't know where the perfume came from; perhaps Mary bought it, or it belonged to her family. However it was, her use of it shows her love for Jesus. When we truly love someone, we don't count the cost. In Mary's mind, nothing was too good for Jesus. In Jesus was combined the authority of a revered rabbi with the presence of the Son of God. Mary saw Jesus for what he was, and her love for him was the natural return of the love he had shown her. The very best that she had to offer could never be too good for Jesus. Which of us has experienced such a completely unselfish love? You all likely know the strength of a first love, such as when you first meet the one who will become your partner or spouse. Is anything too good for that person? Do you not want to shower him or her with every gift you possibly can? That intensity of love is what the Commandment speaks of as loving "with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength." How can a jar of perfume, even if it would bring three hundred silver coins, be too much to give to Jesus?

Second, Mary also shows her devotion in kneeling at Jesus' feet. Jesus and the disciples would be sitting on the floor, half-reclining, with their legs stretched out. Jesus is already on the floor, but Mary puts herself even lower, bending her head towards his feet as she wipes them with her hair. How much more intimate and loving this is than simply using a towel! A little later in the Gospel, Jesus teaches the disciples to wash each other's feet, to serve each other. They will use a towel; Mary uses her own hair. In this way, she shares the perfume with him; its fragrance will remain on both of them. And Mary, as an adult Jewish

woman, would always wear her hair tied up around her head, only letting it down in her own home, with her own family. This is a custom of many Middle Eastern peoples. By letting her hair down with Jesus, she again signals that he is close to her heart, as close as her own brother and sister.

Now, what about Jesus' statement that we will always have the poor with us? As a simple statement, it is, unfortunately, true. There will always be people who are poor, and we should always be aware of them and try to help them. That is part of being a Christian, to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and comfort the afflicted. But Jesus is not being dismissive. He is not saying it's OK to ignore the poor. He is, rather, reminding us of our duty to God, as he did when he spoke about the two greatest commandments: love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength, and love your neighbour as yourself. Those two commandments are stated in that order for a reason. We must always put God first. Mary's gift of the expensive perfume, and the way that she lovingly anointed Jesus, showed her love for God. She has her priorities straight. No doubt she will continue to help those in her community when she can, but just at this moment, she is rightly focussing on Jesus.

Finally, there is a prophetic element to this action of Mary's which Jesus points to. Her anointing foreshadows the anointing of a body for burial. Later on, after Jesus has died, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus take Jesus' body away for burial, and they prepare the body by wrapping it in linen with about 34 kilos of myrrh and aloes, that is, perfumes and lotions. They then place it in the tomb. Jesus uses Mary's anointing as another reminder to the other disciples of the death he will soon suffer.

I think this is truly one of the most beautiful stories in the Gospels, showing us the love of a true disciple for our Lord Jesus Christ. May we learn to show Jesus that same love and devotion in our lives. In his name we pray. Amen.