

Sermon for Lent 5C

The text: John 12:1-8

As you were getting ready to come to church today, perhaps you splashed some after shave on, or a squirt or two of perfume.

Some of the world's most unique and expensive fragrances are these:

- Hermes' 24 Faubourg {foe-borg} Extract. The limited edition comes in crystal bottles. Just 1000 bottles sold all around the world for the price of \$1,500
- "Sacred Tears of Thebes". {Thebees} The bottle is handmade by Baccarat artists and is capped by an amethyst crystal. The bottle holds just over 7 millilitres and sells for \$1,700.
- Jean Patou's Joy Baccarat is next on the list. Only 50 limited-edition bottles are created each year. For two short weeks in summer the 10,600 flowers required for just one bottle of Joy are harvested in the French countryside. For a 15ml bottle it costs \$1,800.
- Caron's Poivre {Pwoav} Created by Michel Morsetti in 1954, comes in a 2ounce bottle that is beautified with crystal with white gold around the neck and sells for \$2000.

To put things into perspective, the perfumed ointment Mary uses in today's Gospel reading is far more expensive than these. It is from the Spikenard plant, a species of highly-prized, aromatic, grassy-leafed plants from India. A small bottle was worth 300 denarii—about a year's wages. Consider that the average base wage today is somewhere around \$40,000. That's what Mary poured out on Jesus' feet.

Is the complaint Judas makes, then, legitimate? "Why was this perfume not sold and the three hundred denarii given to the poor!?" Perhaps Judas' thinking that doing such a thing is a waste and could be better sold and spent helping the poor is understandable. Such extravagance is not something that we usually associate with Lent—a season where we traditionally focus on doing without, of refraining from luxuries.

But Judas is not really concerned about the poor. He says this because he is concerned with what *he's* missing out on. John tells us that Judas was a thief—having charge of the money bag he used to help himself to what was in it. If this ointment was sold for the poor the money would go in the bag and he could dip his hands in again—imagine how much he could do with a year's worth of wages! Judas wasn't concerned about the poor, *he was concerned about himself!* This isn't good for Judas. Think of what Jesus said in Matthew 6:21: "*For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*".

John tells us that this all takes place six days before Passover—the Saturday before holy week. The time is getting closer to Jesus' suffering and death. As Jesus' betrayer, Judas plays a significant part in this. He loves money so much that he would betray Jesus for 30 silver coins. Judas' god was money. That was his treasure and that was where his heart was, and like everything else that people fashion an idol out of, it did not bring him freedom, but enslaved him and cost him his life.

But at the supper we are shown a profound contrast, in Martha and Mary, who serve Jesus by showing hospitality to him. They have experienced the love of Jesus and they want to honour him with this meal as their special guest.

Mary shows honour to Jesus in a special way. It was ancient custom to wash the feet of all invited guests, who usually had to travel a considerable distance by foot. This task was viewed as common courtesy. Mary takes this customary cultural practice of the day and extends it into a profound confession of faith. Jesus explains what this is with his defence of Mary: "Leave her alone; she has reserved it for the day of my burial."

In the ancient world, bodies of the dead were prepared for burial by washing and anointing with a combination of spices and perfumed oils. Mary knew that Jesus was soon going to his death—and when he was crucified, it would be impossible to anoint him on the Cross. So she pours out the extravagance of what she has, such costly love, withholding not one drop. Unlike Judas, who is devoted to the self, Mary is devoted to Jesus. In contrast to Judas who is concerned only for himself, Mary spares no expense, honouring Jesus above herself. Mary didn't count this perfumed ointment as too costly for Jesus.

And so the perfume—usually contained in an alabaster jar that was broken open—was entirely emptied—symbolic of Mary's broken and contrite heart from which all the contents were poured out for her Lord. The task of foot-washing was a menial task reserved to the lowliest servant. Mary wasn't—but now she makes herself to be. But it is what Mary does next that is just as profound. She uses her hair to dry Jesus' feet. The hair on our head is the highest point of our body. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11 that a woman's hair is her *glory*. Mary used her crowning glory, her honour, as a towel for her King. To do this at the very feet of Jesus suggests an act of complete devotion and humility. In doing so, she is an example for us all.

How do the vastly different attitudes of Mary and Judas lead us to reflect on where *our* treasure is? In this season of Lent, a season with a particular emphasis on reflecting on God's word; his word that calls us to repentance—do we kneel at the feet of Jesus and pour out our hearts to him—surrendering our selfishness by which we betray Jesus just like Judas did, with our thoughts and attitudes, words, our lack of serving others and instead serving ourselves? Do we pour out our devotion to Jesus like Mary did, withholding nothing? Where is our starting point for our giving to Jesus—extravagance or thriftiness? Where is serving God on our list of priorities, with our money and time and talents? Whatever we give—or hold back from God, and whether we do it joyfully or reluctantly and with resentment shows what our heart holds dear. God wants our broken and contrite hearts, humble hearts, servant hearts. What treasure does our heart cling to? This is a crucial question that today's text puts before us.

Our faith in Jesus is not just a mental acknowledgement. It is not merely verbal confession. It is an outpouring. Mary's outpouring of the expensive perfume which cost her so much showed where her heart was; who she was devoted to. She was more concerned about giving away than keeping for herself.

Yet Mary's devotion to Jesus is only possible because it is empowered by God's own devotion to her. Mary's extravagance is a response to, and is empowered by God's own extravagance in Christ. In Christ God poured out the riches of heaven upon the world, especially through his holy and precious blood. There are so many connections with this in today's text.

The supper that was prepared for Jesus as the guest of honour, who was served by Mary, is close to Passover, when we hear that it was Jesus who put himself at the lowest place, that of a servant, washing his disciples' feet. It was on the night of the Passover, the night that Jesus was betrayed by Judas, that we hear Jesus was at another supper. This time he is not the guest of honour but the host. Jesus took bread and said: This is my body given for you, do this in remembrance of me, and after the supper he took the cup and said: This is my blood of the new covenant which is shed for you, for the forgiveness of sins. Do this in remembrance of me. It was the meal that Jesus instituted before he would be unjustly arrested, tried, beaten, mocked and crucified, bearing the sins of the world to reconcile the world to God.

It is through Christ that God shows his extravagant devotion to the world; those who reject, betray and mock him. Although he is the Son of God and King of heaven, Jesus did not think of himself, but he showed God's commitment to free us from sin, death and the devil. It is there on the Cross that we see that God was not concerned with what he might lose. Like the perfume from Mary's Alabaster jar, God in Christ poured out the fullness of his love for the world. There he shows us the extravagance of his lavish love. Paul says in Ephesians 1:7-8 "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us."

Mary's extravagance is a glimpse of God's extravagance, who in Christ, held nothing back for us, and continues to pour out the fullness of his divine grace, lavish love, and ever-present help for us. We see what a good and loving Lord he is with the presence of another person at the table in our text; that of Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised. There are so many connections in today's short passage that point ahead to Jesus' imminent death, but the presence of Lazarus points further; --three days after Jesus died.

For the presence of Lazarus, eating at the table, is a glimpse of Jesus' own resurrection; the resurrection he would win for all people, and share with us in baptism. There he has washed not only our feet but our whole body, and he anointed us not with perfume but with the Holy Spirit our Father in heaven poured out upon us through Jesus. Joined to Jesus and made new through water and the word, we share in his own death and resurrection, and indeed, he has brought life out of death for us! By holding firm to Christ in faith we will join with Mary and Martha, Lazarus and all the other saints of all times and places in the heavenly banquet without end, the banquet at which we are the Lord's guests of honour.

May the death and resurrection of Jesus always be the strength and source of our love to others, so that rather than lamenting over what we lose out on, we rejoice in what we can give away. And may the death and resurrection of Jesus always strengthen, inspire and work in us, so that, like Mary, we too pour out love on him who died and rose again for all people, and for us. Amen.