

John 12 v.3-4: “Mary poured the perfume on Jesus’ feet....but Judas Iscariot objected”

(Sunday Gospel: John 12: 1-8)

This is the story of a contrast, a conflict, between a woman who gives and a man who grudges: a woman who gives and doesn’t count the cost, and a man who grudges because he *does* count the cost – a rapid calculation shows him that the perfume cost a year’s wages.

So, yes, it was an extravagance. Yes, it was an expense. Yes, it was an indulgence. Judas was quite right: his head indicated that this was a waste of money. But Mary’s heart told her differently: this was love’s extravagance, love’s expense, and with love there can be no “nicely calculated less or more”.

In pouring the perfume on Jesus’ feet, Mary lavishes 3 things on the Lord:

- I. She lavishes on him all her love and gratitude for what he had done for her and for what he had done for her brother Lazarus. Just before this, Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, as pledge and pointer to himself as the Resurrection and the Life. He had raised him from the dead; he comes again to Bethany; they give a dinner in his honour; and Mary pours the perfume on him. She gave all she had, the most precious thing she possessed – and in so doing showed she was close to the heart of God Himself . For God so loved the world that he gave....
- II. She lavishes on him her devotion. This was the same Mary who earlier sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his word. Here she is again at the Lord’s feet, this time to anoint them. She is happy to take the lowest place so that she might do this for him. And when Judas would stop her, the Lord says to him “Leave her alone” – the only rebuke Jesus ever gave to Judas the betrayer. “Leave her alone” or in the original, “let her go” or even “let her let herself go” to discharge the fullness of her heart. “Pour out your hearts before him”, says the Psalmist. Mary pours out her devotion and the house is filled with the fragrance.
 - Are we ready, willing, or able to pour out our love?
 - Is this house filled with the fragrance of our devotion?
 - Do our lives have that odour of sanctity so that others will take note that we have been with Jesus?

Thanks be to God, cries St. Paul, who through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of X

III. Mary lavishes on him her service: she anointed him in anticipation of his death and burial, doing what she could.

That was *her* service. But meanwhile, here's Martha – bless her heart—doing what *she* could. Martha also served: she cooked and served the dinner. Plain, honest-to-goodness Martha has no time for these fal-de-ral's with fancy perfumes. Martha rolls up her sleeves and gets on with it.

“Lord of all pots and pans and things
Since I have no time to be a saint by doing lovely things or
Watching late with thee,
Make me a saint by getting meals and washing up the plates”

That's Martha, but here equally is Mary doing what she is given to do. And she takes her opportunity while it's there. She takes her chance of doing this service for her Lord before it's too late. She doesn't put off till tomorrow what she is able to do today, because tomorrow he won't be there. She seizes the moment before it passes.

There are moments in life which do not come again a second time. Impulses to love, devotion, service enter the heart and if they are not acted on at once they may never return. “If there is any kindness I can show, any good thing I can do, let me do it now. Let me not defer it or neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again”.

Mary poured out her perfume in a supreme expression of love and devotion and service.

But Judas objected. It appears to be a high-minded objection: the money should have been given to the poor. But in fact Judas is betraying the poor by stealing from the money. It's the sort of theft and corruption all too familiar to us in South Africa today.

On the one hand, Judas – treacherous, greedy and turned in on himself. On the other, Mary - beautiful with all the soul's expansion. Be like Mary and you enhance life. Be like Judas and you draw down the darkness: “Judas went out and it was night”.

But in his darkness, what thoughts may have remained with Judas? What memories of Mary may have lingered? What fragrance of her devotion may yet have clung to him? Robert Buchanan, the 19thc poet, has a poem on Judas Iscariot and this is how it ends. The Marriage supper of the Lamb has come at last in heaven. Everything is ready; the guests are present; but Christ the Bridegroom is restless, pacing up and down. He goes to the open door, looks out and waits. Then a figure emerges slowly from the shadows:

The Holy Supper is spread within,
And the many candles shine,
And I have waited long for thee,
Before I poured the wine.

The supper wine is poured at last,
The lights burn bright and fair,
Iscariot washes the Bridegroom's feet,
And dries them with his hair.

Self-giving love is the way of the Lord: "he poured out his life unto death".

Self-giving love is the way of the saints: "the way of self-giving, Lord, leads us to you."

Self-giving love is the way for each one of us:

Take my life and let it be
Consecrated, Lord, to thee....
Take my love; my Lord, I pour
At thy feet its treasure-store.

And now unto him that loved us and gave himself for us be ascribed by us and by the whole Church all might, majesty, dominion and glory now and for ever.