

Church of All Nations

John 12:1-8

I went to see Jesus Christ Superstar recently. I think it has stood up pretty well – it must be 50 years since it was first performed. But then again the book on which it is based is even older! With every decade we are getting further away from people who will be familiar with the story – from SS, from their own bible readings. And so at this production you could scan the QR code and get a list of the characters.

Jesus Christ – the leader of the apostles. He is leading a movement of compassion that preaches love and tolerance.

Judas Iscariot – Jesus right hand man who becomes concerned that fame is getting in the way of their message. He makes a decision that will change the course of both of their lives.

Mary Madgalene – a follower of Jesus' movement who regularly tends to him. She finds herself grappling with her feelings and her faith.

Not the Mary in today's story. This is Mary the sister of Lazarus. You may remember Lazarus – the guy sitting over there, you know the one Jesus brought back from the dead... what!!!! Would you be thinking Wow, that's the thing that happens when Jesus is around, or would you be thinking... gee his skin looks a bit yellow, or would you be thinking what this guy has seen, and where he has been, what stories he could tell

Getting close to Easter, next week is Palm Sunday, and the beginning of Holy Week. The anointing of Jesus at Bethany is the last event in John's gospel before Jesus's "triumphal entry" and the ensuing passion narrative. A version of this incident appears in all 4 gospels. They have in common that a woman anoints Jesus with expensive ointment but vary in details such as when in Jesus' ministry this took place, where this happened, was it Jesus' head or feet that were anointed, and critically the identity of the woman.

God has created us with 5 senses, we tend to over use the two of hearing and seeing in worship. Touch we used to use in Passing the Peace but now we cannot even do that. Taste – once a month at communion when we sip some

juice and nibble a piece of bread. Smell- virtually ignored in our Protestant tradition at worship. But today we have a story that is remembered for fragrance.

Today the lectionary throws up a poignant story of Mary's anointing of Jesus with the costly ointment. He is the Anointed One. The "Messiah" – anointed by the Spirit at his baptism and now anointed by Mary. Today we are in the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus and Mary anoints the guest. Just as an aside, we read in a few verses after today's segment that the authorities are planning to remove not just Jesus but also Lazarus. And why Lazarus? Well because he was raised from the dead and the associated publicity has created a furore and is leading people away from the religious authorities. So rather bizarrely someone had decided it would be a good plan to kill him again! And I am thinking, but what if Jesus raises him from the dead again!?

Anyway Mary anoints not the head of Jesus - that may be expected - but the feet, and not with oil, which may have been expected but a super expensive ointment, worth up to a year's salary for a worker. And in an evocative expression the fragrance of the perfume fills the air. A reckless sensual wild act... and endorsed by Jesus.

Scientists say that while words go to the thinking part of the brain, smells-fragrances--go to the emotional part, the amygdala. That's why a whiff of Grandma's perfume brings Grandma herself back for a brief moment, and for some, why a bit of incense is the smell of the divine. And why maybe it is important to include a range of sensory experiences in worship – to engage more than our heads and our thinking in the worship of God – who made all our senses.

It is an extravagant gesture and we have been struck this Lent that despite being in this traditionally penitential season there are many stories of abundance. And there are a lot of incidents of abundance in John's gospel. It begins with a story of divine extravagance for human enjoyment — the equivalent of 600 bottles of the best wine at the wedding in Cana. This was the "first sign" that Jesus did, said John. The feeding of the 5,000 with 12 baskets of bread left over. And now Mary anoints Jesus with perfume that's worth a year's wages. From start to finish, then, life as a child of God is marked by excess and extravagance, both given and received. And I thought, Jesus did so much for so many people in the gospels. Who ever did anything for him. I guess he got invited to some meals, but really, Who else does anything much for Jesus? Yet here we have someone extravagantly pouring out her love – reflecting back to Jesus the love that God has for all people.

Judas though protests at the wastefulness of this act. "What a waste... a year's wages were spent on that perfume, and here you have just gone and wasted it". To be honest, in our pragmatic, outcome oriented society, and if we did not know

Judas was meant to be a hypocritical crook, we could find ourselves in agreement with much of his sentiment. Perfume versus feeding/clothing the poor... like asking Mother Theresa to dinner and serving a \$1,000 bottle of French champagne. Probably the church itself and many of us given our upbringing and values has railed against similar supposedly self indulgent, trivial and superficial choices. In the world in which I grew up Judas would be speaking for all of us when he criticised Mary's reckless extravagance

Jesus response is twofold. First, to challenge Judas in his alleged concern for the poor. If you are so concerned for the poor, you could always give. The poor, they were there with you yesterday and you gave nothing or little, they will be with you tomorrow and you might have given a little of your excess. And here, presented starkly are two choices. Who do you want to be like? Where do you sit in this contrast between the character/mind-set of Judas and Mary.

But secondly and more profoundly, Jesus refuses to rebuke Mary on the basis that her act was a costly sacrificial act motivated by devotion to Jesus. To not accept her sacrificial act would have been devastating.

Something similar happened to me when I was at St Kilda and it has stayed with me although in this story the money did end up with the poor. I conducted the funeral of a woman's husband ... I had never met him, and only got involved when a neighbor of theirs literally turned up on my door step and asked me if I did funerals. The neighbor explained that the man who had died had a psychiatric condition that dated right back to his years of war service and they were not well off and could I help out. I said yes and did the funeral and a month later she appeared on my door step with a reasonable amount of money in her hand and said it was for the drop in centre that the church ran. This was a community centre for people with a psychiatric illness that I had mentioned during the course of our conversations. My first reaction was to protest, No, no really this is not necessary, you keep it, you will need it. After a couple of exchanges, I realized what was happening and changed my attitude. I saw what I was trying to do was take something from this woman still in grief – her chance to express something of what was going on in her. Thankfulness for her husband, gratitude for someone who helped out at a time of need, a desire to give to a ministry among people whose situation she knew a fair bit about. Who knows what else.

So I was given the grace to say, Thank you on behalf of all who will receive from your gift. It is very generous of you and it will make a difference. I shall ensure it is used in the best way possible. Now acknowledge you would need to ensure

the woman was able to make a sound decision about where she was giving her money.

Life doesn't know all that many extravagant gestures. Ones that are directed towards the benefit of others I mean. Not many times of exuberant, grand occasions; done with a carefree abandon, and motivated by a worshipful devotion. I am not just talking monetary gestures here, but all sorts of acts of sacrifice and devotion. They are not unknown, but they are rare.

Mary's act of devotion is grand, almost naïve in its extravagance. Love gives what it can and does not count the cost. What is a year's wages when you have been given life in all its fullness? Mary's act of devotion is also wordless. She never utters a word. Seems it is possible to find ways beyond words to worship and adore.

Mary makes one today, and her story is still told thousands of years later. In part because the aroma from Mary's poignant act with the perfumed ointment takes on the added meaning of prefiguring Jesus' burial.