

John 12:1-8
Philippians 3:4b-14

When I get the opportunity, I like to wander around the perfumery sections of stores like M&S and Debenhams, and try out some of the testers, especially if you want to smell nice without having to fork out any dosh. And a couple of things always strike me whenever I go into these places. The first thing is the overwhelming nature of the *aromas* of the various fragrances which waft around the store. And the other thing is that I never fail to be shocked at the exorbitant *prices* of the different brand name products; perfumes are all just so expensive, often for what is just a very small bottle. And it does sometimes cross my mind, 'why waste so much money on this kind of thing, when there are so many poor people around the world who don't even have their basic necessities provided for?'

So, I can imagine *something* of what it must have been like to have been in that house in Bethany when Mary broke open that expensive bottle of

perfume and anointed Jesus' feet with it. The Gospel writer notes the way in which the aroma of the fragrance filled the house, but also the manner in which Mary's actions met with a rebuke from Judas concerning the morality of *wasting* this perfume (as *he* sees it), rather than selling it and giving the money to the poor.

Now the setting for the incident is a dinner given in Jesus' honour at Bethany, at which Lazarus (whom he had raised from the dead) was present. And Jesus was on his final journey to Jerusalem – to the Cross. It was a poignant moment, and so during the course of the meal, Mary comes along with the really expensive perfume – expensive because it was probably imported from India and was of a very large quantity (11½oz or 335g.....) – it was clearly the 'Chanel no5', Ralph Lauren or Givenchy of its day.

And in anointing Jesus, what Mary demonstrates is a great act of devotion to the Lord. What's more, the depth of her devotion is seen in her willingness to actually unwind her hair and wipe Jesus' feet with it;

a woman's long hair was, at the time, seen as her glory, so unwinding it would have been regarded as an unseemly thing to do. Yet Mary was nonetheless willing to accept the shame and embarrassment, in order to openly declare her devotion to Christ. And the outward effect of her devotion, as it were, was that the house was filled with the odour of the perfume.

Now initially it would seem that Judas' objection to Mary's actions is understandable - the perfume was, after all, worth a year's wages, so just think how much help this would have been if used on the poor. *But* the Gospel writer notes that Judas' *real* concern was with his *own* loss of an opportunity to steal from the common purse. He was evidently a kind of 'treasurer' for the band of disciples, so any money gained from the sale of the perfume would have gone into the coffers, from which Judas could then help himself. His intentions aren't quite as altruistic as might at first appear.

So, what we find here is a stark contrast between the way of self-giving and depth of devotion demonstrated by *Mary*, and the depth of *Judas'* deceit which was one further step along the path to self-destruction. Judas really didn't care about Jesus – after all, he was about to betray him. But in Mary we see a real love for the Lord, expressed practically in an act of pure devotion.

And what's more, Jesus himself defends Mary's actions by pointing out the deep significance of what she has done. Because the anointing points *forward* to his impending death and burial. Mary herself would not have been aware of the deeper meaning behind what she did, but it would soon be revealed to her that her actions preceded and foreshadowed his burial. There was a *divine* purpose in what she did. And as Jesus points out to Judas, there would be no shortage of opportunities to give to the poor – it's *not* a choice between *either* acts of devotion *or* acts of compassion, but rather *both and*. For Jesus' first disciples there was little time left for them to express devotion to him during his time on earth.

Now there are a few things, in particular, which I'd like to briefly highlight here, which impact upon our *own* walk with the Lord.

First of all, we see revealed here the nature of true devotion to the Lord. It's a really precious thing where *costliness* is used to express an overflow of our heart's devotion to God. When you truly love someone and you give them an expensive present, the cost of it really shouldn't matter. In the same way, the greatest devotion is to give our *all* to the Lord – to put ourselves, our gifts and our talents, as well as our material possessions, at *his* disposal. In fact, when you think of it, we don't actually own anything – everything we have is from God – we are simply called to be good stewards of all that he has entrusted to us. As King David once prayed, "For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you."

Now as with Judas' response to Mary's actions, the world often regards *our* acts of devotion to God as

foolish: 'why bother going to church to worship every Sunday, when you can have a lie-in?'; 'why bother giving money to Christian causes when you can spend it on yourself?'; 'why waste your time, energy and resources in this way', they might say? *But* if we are committed to following the Lord, then we are simply compelled to openly express our love for and dedication to him, whatever others might say or think. So, we might like to think about what it might mean for *us* to give ourselves wholly to God. It certainly gives us a radically new perspective on life and how we live it.

Then secondly, the incident highlights the fact that true devotion to the Lord is always characterised by an attitude of gratitude. For Mary, her thankfulness to the Lord is expressed in her willingness to break open a bottle of expensive perfume and anoint his feet. God's free gift of salvation in Jesus Christ offered to *us* should naturally cause us to respond with sincere gratitude. We love God because he first loved us; our love and our thankfulness to him is in response to *his* love for us.

Now gratitude is not something which comes easily to us today. In the UK, we tend rather to expect things as a right, and so much we have can easily be taken for granted, not least things like a free healthcare system and state-funded education - things which most people around the world can only long for. And the same can so often be the case in our relationship with God. We can come before God in prayer with our lengthy shopping list of requests, and yet it's so easy to forget to *thank* him for blessings received – to give thanks to him for his faithfulness to us. Yes indeed, asking the Lord for his help in various things rightly expresses our dependence upon him, but at the same time, in itself, it's rather self-focused, in that our prayers can become simply about what we can get out of God. By contrast, looking back in thankfulness to God is quite free from this. So this might be something we need to contemplate in regard to our *own* prayer life - that it's not just about reeling off a string of petitions, but that we also express our heartfelt

gratitude to the Lord for who he is and for all he has done for us.

Then thirdly, we find here something of a model for Christian service. To begin with, we find here the true motivation for such service. Because serving others in the name of Christ should be a natural expression of our devotion and gratitude to the Lord for all his love to us. Christ loves us, and so, in turn, we are called to share his love with others. We're reminded, too, that just as Mary's actions were criticised, so there will be those who might think that our Christian service is simply a waste of time. So we need to persevere in serving Christ.

Fourthly, we see demonstrated in Mary a perceptive heart. Although perhaps she would not have grasped the full significance of her actions at the time, nevertheless she somehow perceived something in the mind of Jesus. In the same way, when we sit at Jesus' feet, as it were, and listen to him / to his word, we begin to attune with *his* mind and to discern in what ways we can serve him.

And finally, we find here a model for *fruitful* service. Remember that the costly fragrance filled the house. In the same way, our sincere service in Christ's name *will* touch and bless others, perhaps more than we can ever imagine. Now we might think that the ways in which we engage in Christian service in our day-to-day lives doesn't really have any great impact upon the world – 'what real difference do my small, seemingly insignificant, actions make?', we might ask. But, as Mother Theresa once famously remarked, "We ourselves feel that what we are doing is just a drop in the ocean. But the ocean would be less because of that missing drop." In our reading from his Letter to the Philippians, the apostle Paul speaks of the way in which he had given up everything – pride of birth, upbringing and character – in order to obey Jesus and his Gospel. Following Christ meant a continual self-giving – pouring out his devotion and energy to the One who had made him his own. Paul's life was now dedicated to filling the world with the fragrance of the Good News of Jesus Christ. To what extent can we say that about *ourselves*?

So this morning, as we share once again in Holy Communion, and as we're reminded of God's love for us demonstrated supremely in the sacrificial death of his Son upon the Cross so that we might be forgiven, may we, in turn, respond with true love and thankfulness. And may we seek to go from here, strengthened and empowered by the Holy Spirit to serve Christ faithfully in our daily lives, that the world may be filled with the fragrance of the Lord Jesus. So, as Bishop Tom Wright puts it, 'what smell are *we* giving off?'

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your immeasurable love for us, expressed supremely in the death of your Son upon the Cross, so that we might know the forgiveness of our sins and be reconciled to you. Help us to wholeheartedly commit our lives to your service and to make an impact for Christ in our daily lives. In his name we pray. Amen.