Lent 5 Sermon delivered at the Parish of The Parks and shared with St Margarets Eltham

John 12: 1-8

There is a variety symbolic ways to think about this gospel. In terms of the themes it is about light and darkness, and falsity and truth, greed and self-less giving to suggest just a few. Each of the gospels mentions the anointing of Jesus, they provide conflicting details, yet each of the account provides some form of tension created by Mary’s action.

Jesus mentions his burial, and this confirms that his end is coming. How shocking it must have been to see an action normally reserved for the dead, happening within the context of a meal.

It may be hard for us to grasp the intimate nature of Mary’s action. She does something that potentially makes us feel uncomfortable. I found myself thinking about the issue of discomfort as I watched Shane Warne’s youngest daughter pour out intimate details of their relationship at his public memorial with thousands at the venue and millions viewing on-line. I wanted to turn away.

Then I wondered about sharing this next example with you. During my Ph D study I was part of a research colloquium. One of the members of this group was Catholic Priest. For the life of me I can’t remember why we found ourselves talking about this gospel, but I do remember what he said about it. I quote “I know what would have happened to me if a woman wiped my feet with her hair!” So I think it is safe to say we are in the realm of discomfort when it comes to Mary’s action.

What a contrast there is between Judas’ express outward complaint against Mary’s wasteful extravagance and her gentle gesture.

I turned to some female commentators to see what they had so say about this event. Chelsea Harmon said: “Mary doesn’t care about what other people think. Her focus is on Jesus. She rejects all of the honourable ways of expressing her gratitude and love to him. She is a single woman who not only touches an adult man, she lets down her hair in order to use it as a towel. In that time and place, letting down your hair, and sharing physical touch were actions meant for the confines of marriage.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Further, Hermon claims the aroma that fills the room invites everyone there to participate in its beauty. Mary’s personal act of worship becomes an experience of blessing for each of the dinner guests to witness and participate in.

We know what Judas thought, but I wonder what others saw? Lazarus is present but does not speak. We as readers see that Mary’s action prefigures the time when Jesus will wipe the feet of his disciples.

Harmon then asks the question: “does Mary know that Jesus will die soon, or was she proclaiming what she knew to be true: that Jesus is the one in whom death becomes life-the conqueror of death”[[2]](#footnote-2). Mary had much to be grateful for since the raising of her brother Lazarus.

This is what Dorothy Lee has to say about the event. “The cost of what Jesus does in raising Lazarus is paralleled in a symbolic way by the costly oil that Mary lavishes on Jesus. Cost is met with cost and the mutual nature of discipleship is reinforced. Mary stands as an authentic model of discipleship and the costliness it calls forth in response to the costliness of Jesus’ journey to the cross and laying down his life.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

So where do we go with this event and the emotion it evokes? One thing to remember about symbols is that their meaning is never exhausted. Exegesis of a gospel contains meaning linking it to prior text and projecting specific possibilities. In the words of the Post-Modern philosopher Jacques Derrida, definition of terms is always deferred so there can be no finality to meaning. There is an endless stream of possibilities.

Connecting with the issues I raised last week about the spiritual journey, meaning can change in us as. Words and images evoked by one reading may be different each time we read. As we change and grow so does our potential to learn.

This is what Jan Richardson says of the anointing: “She comes to the table. She comes from beyond the boundaries. She comes as if she belongs. She comes as if her whole life has been distilled into this one gesture that she offers: lifting, breaking, pouring. She comes with no words, yet with her entire being she proclaims a message both prophetic and priestly as she ministers to Jesus just days before his death. Richardson then reflects on her ministry as an artist saying we in the church somehow acts of beauty and grace as somehow separate from and less important than acts of justice and caring for others. Like Jesus’ dining gests that day we tend to think what is creative and artful as a luxury, as tangential, as wasteful.

Yet this woman’s graceful gesture-and Jesus’ grateful receiving of it dispels such a notion. The story impresses upon us how beauty and justice are not separate from one another but are each part of our response to Christ who offers himself to us with extravagant love and grace and who calls us to offer bread and beauty from the same hand”[[4]](#footnote-4).

What does this event represent for you? Is it discomfort such as my Catholic Priest friend? Is it about beauty? Is it an event which emits an aroma that saturates the onlooker, even us today?

Jan Richardson states; As we reflect on this woman’s lavish gift that ministered to Jesus’ deepest need, I share a question I want to share a question with you inspired by Marcrina Weidkeh’s reflection in her book *Seasons of Your Heart*

**Blessing of Balm**

When we see

the body of Christ

still broken in this world,

may we meet it

with lavish grace

and pour ourselves out

With extravagant love.

Jan’s question is: **What are you willing to waste on Jesus**?

Reference

Harmon C. *John 12: 1-8 Commentary* https CEPREACHING .ORG

Lee, D. *Ministry of Women In The New Testament* Baker Academic Grand Rapids USA 2021

Richardson, J. *The Painted Prayerbook* For March 31 (Day 34 of Lent)

1. Harmon, C. *Commentary on John 12: 1-8* p2 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Harmon, C. Ibid p3 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 3 Lee, D. *Women of the New Testament* p91

   4 Lee. D. Op Cit 91 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Richardson, J. *The Painted Prayer Book,* for March 31 Electronic version [↑](#footnote-ref-4)