

Sunday 6 April – Lent 5

Sermon by Anne-Marie Renshaw

An audio recording of the sermon will be available after the service at [Sermons \(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk\)](http://Sermons(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk))

Extravagant Gratitude

It was six days before the Passover. This is the festival at which the Jewish people remember how God brought them out of Egypt under Moses' leadership after they had been enslaved there. It is a celebration of God's saving power and the freedom that he gave to his people from those who were oppressing them. It was and still is an important festival.

Many people would have travelled to Jerusalem for the festival. There was great speculation in this particular year about whether or not Jesus would be going to the festival celebrations at the temple in Jerusalem. He had been travelling around the villages, but had recently withdrawn to a town on the edges of the desert because the Jewish Council in Jerusalem had begun openly plotting against him. Now people wanted to see if he would go to Jerusalem or whether he would stay away. The chief priests had already given orders that he was to be arrested on sight and tensions were running high. Would Jesus risk appearing in public in Jerusalem or would he play it safe and lie low somewhere else?

Jesus was indeed on his way to Jerusalem and six days before the festival, he arrived at Bethany. Bethany was a village about two miles outside Jerusalem. It was the home of Lazarus, Martha and Mary, where Jesus had been a guest before.

The brother and sisters decided to give a supper in Jesus' honour, perhaps as a sign of their gratitude for what Jesus had done for them just a short time earlier when he had raised Lazarus from the dead. Martha seems to have been in charge of the catering arrangements. We are not told how many guests there were or exactly who they were, but it seems that the disciples were present with Jesus.

At some point during the evening, Mary brought in a pound of very expensive perfume and used it to anoint Jesus' feet, which she then wiped with her hair.

We are so used to hearing this story that we all too easily forget what a strange thing this was for Mary to do. She had no business to be touching Jesus' feet at all. It would have been customary for a servant to offer to wash them at the beginning of the meal, but not for one of the daughters of the house to pour perfume over them in this way. Even more shocking was her decision to dry Jesus' feet with her hair. Mary's hair should have been pinned up and probably covered in mixed company. She should certainly not have been letting it down and using it to touch the feet of a man who was not even related to her. What she did would have shocked everyone present at the meal.

The oil Mary used was spikenard, a very expensive fragrant oil. It originated in India, which probably explains why it was so expensive in first-century Palestine. The fact that Mary possessed such a perfume indicates that her family was a wealthy one. A pound sounds like rather a lot of it and John tells us that the whole house was filled with the fragrance.

What did Mary think she was doing? Why did she choose to pour this costly substance, which may have been a significant part of her family's wealth, over the feet of this man in such a public setting? Perhaps it was an act of gratitude for her brother's life. Perhaps it was an act of deep love and devotion for Jesus, whose teaching we know Mary had listened to with such relish. Did she have any inkling of what was to happen to Jesus in just a few days' time? Could she possibly have sensed that this would be her only opportunity to anoint Jesus before his burial?

Everyone present may well have been shocked by Mary's action, but there was one person who spoke out. Judas Iscariot cried, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?"

A denarius was a silver Roman coin and was about the equivalent of a day's pay for a labourer. So here Judas gives us an indication of just how much money Mary had poured all over the floor: roughly a year's wages for a working man.

John doesn't ascribe the purest of motives to Judas. He suggests that Judas only protested because he was in charge of the money Jesus shared with his

disciples and he was in the habit of stealing from it. John implies that Judas would have liked Mary to give the perfume to Jesus so he could sell it and Judas could help himself to some of the proceeds before passing the rest on to the poor.

We don't know whether this was in Judas' mind or not. Perhaps John only paints him in this light in hindsight, knowing that Judas was to go on to betray Jesus for the sum of just thirty silver coins.

But we can perhaps sympathise with Judas' point of view. If Mary wanted to anoint Jesus with perfume, then did she have to use quite such an expensive one, or quite so much of it? Wouldn't it have been better, if she wanted to please Jesus, to put this wealth to better use rather than wasting it in such an extravagant way? Think about your yearly income and imagine how you would feel if someone poured that all over the floor.

But look at how Jesus reacts: "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial."

This is a very odd thing to say, because Mary has not kept the oil for the day of Jesus' burial, she has just tipped it all over his feet and then mopped it up with her hair. But perhaps Jesus saw something symbolic in what she had done. Did he already know that he was making his final journey to Jerusalem, the journey that would culminate in his death on the cross? He knew that there was a warrant out for his arrest. He must have been aware that there were by now enough people who wanted to see him dead. In fact, John has already told us that it was Jesus' action in raising Mary's brother Lazarus from the dead that proved to be the last straw for the Council and made them determined to have him killed.

What Jesus said next sounds equally strange: "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." How often in the gospels do we hear Jesus urging people to show concern for the poor? He tells the rich young man to sell his possessions and give the proceeds to the poor. He teaches that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven. He constantly speaks about the needs of the poor and the hypocrisy of the rich. So why this sudden declaration of what almost appears to be selfishness on Jesus' part?

It seems clear here that he is aware that he will not be with his disciples for much longer. If ever there was a time for extravagant acts of devotion towards Jesus, then this is it. Perhaps he was deeply moved by Mary's demonstration of her love for him. Perhaps he sensed that she feared for him, that she wanted to take this last chance to show her devotion to him. For what is Mary's action if not an act of worship, an acknowledgement that Jesus is worth giving everything for?

Jesus accepts her generous gift and almost chastises his disciples for their failure to recognise the importance of the moment and to offer him their undivided worship.

What would we have done in Mary's situation? Would we have thought of honouring Jesus in this way? Would we perhaps have used just a little of the perfume, prudently saving the rest for future use? Or would we too have thrown caution to the winds and shocked our friends and relatives by pouring a year's worth of resources over Jesus' feet and wiping it away with our hair?

And what are we prepared to offer Jesus as we approach this Passiontide? Will we let Holy Week and Easter go by without giving him a moment's thought or will we make time in our busy lives to reflect afresh on what he went through and offer him our heartfelt praise and thanksgiving?

Mary's act of love flowed out of her gratitude to Jesus for what he had done both for her brother and for her.

Our gift to Jesus should also be a response to what he has given to us. If you can look back over the last year and see that God has made a difference to your life, that he has been with you through difficulty or helped you find answers to prayer, if you have been aware of the depth of his love for you and of Jesus' willingness to give his very self for you, then perhaps you too will want to drop everything, just for a moment, and find the spiritual equivalent of pouring oil over Jesus' feet.

Don't make the mistake that Judas did. Don't get so caught up in the practicalities of preparing for Easter that you fail to see the sheer beauty of the moment. Don't let the moment pass without offering your response to God.

Whatever you choose to offer to Jesus this Passiontide, do it wholeheartedly, do it because you love him and he loves you, do it, as Mary did, with the extravagance and freedom that comes from knowing that whatever you can give Jesus, he has already given so much more to you.