
Freedom and Generosity



Lent 5



Child and mother from Brace Bridge welcoming a visitor from the UK with a jasmine garland and anointing her with a bindi.

READING - JOHN 12:1-8

Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honour. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the

poor? It was worth a year's wages." He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

"Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me."

REFLECT

This is a story of profound contrasts. Mary takes a pint of costly nard, valued at about the annual income of a manual labourer. She pours it lavishly and lovingly on the feet of Jesus, and the fragrance of the perfume fills the whole house. The sweet smell of this perfume counters the stench of Lazarus's tomb in the previous chapter (11:39). Life and death, wholeness and corruption are contrasted. Lazarus' presence with Jesus at the table is a powerful reminder that death is not the end.

But the contrast between the stench of death and the fragrance of Mary's offering is not the only one. There is a moving contrast between the extravagance of Mary's action and the petty greed of Judas. John portrays Judas as a thief who is only concerned with his own security and selfish interests. Mary's generosity, on the other hand, exceeds extravagance. It is an act of profound love and abandon, flowing from the heart, expressed in a deeply symbolic action.

Judas tries to justify his stance by undermining Mary's generosity and seeming recklessness. It's hard to tell if he is more embarrassed by her dramatic actions or concerned about the money he sees being poured away in front of his very eyes. Jesus' response "You will always have the poor among you" has often been misconstrued by those who claim that trying to solve issues of poverty is a hopeless task ("The poor will always be here...there's nothing we can do about it"). But that misses the point. Jesus recognises Mary's action for what it is, an outpouring of love which gives everything, whatever the cost.

This passage is a stark reminder that selfishness and greed will always result in suffering for the poorest in society. But the example of Mary offers another, albeit costly, way.

RESPOND

Imagine yourself at the table in Bethany with Jesus.

How do you respond to Mary's extravagant action? How does it challenge you?

Listen to the response of Judas. How does it challenge you?

Think about your own life and resources. How might you use what you have to bring the fragrance of life and hope to those around you?

PRAYER

Lord of life, we pray for fullness of life.

For ourselves.

For others.

For our world.

We resolve to live life in all its fullness.

We seek to enable others to live life in all its fullness too. Amen.

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