

Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8

Sermon series on Jesus and Power

(Invite children to coming forward with a “precious” item they were asked to bring with them today.)

- What have they brought?
- Why is it precious?

Is there anybody they would share this with?..... if so, how would they/the other person feel?..... Would sharing it make a difference?

In today’s gospel story Jesus is at the home is his friends Lazarus, Mary and Martha. Mary has something precious, some very expensive oil and she uses it to anoint Jesus’ feet. It is oil with a very a lovely perfume for we are told the fragrance filled the whole house...

I have something like that here...Mary used pure nard to anoint Jesus and although this is not pure nard there’s some of it in there mixed with other perfumes. I love it.... it’s very precious to me and I keep safely shut away in the bathroom cupboard.

Can you smell it? No? (bottle closed). But I want you to enjoy it too so what should I do?*put a tiny drop on each child’s hand.* Can you smell it now? There’s none left now. Do you think I’ve wasted it? Why/why not?

When you go back to your seat do you think others beside you will be able to smell it? Maybe we can fill the whole church with the fragrance just like the house was in the gospel story? Let’s try that – *children return to their seats.*

Today marks the last in our Lent sermon series “Jesus and Power”. Over the past weeks we have reflected on how the power of Jesus is a subversion of what is deemed to be mark power and success in the world’s eyes. Today is no different, for the gospel reading turns upside down, or perhaps I should say right side up, a common understanding of precious possessions. Not of the owning of something of value, something precious, but of the control that can give us over others. I have, you don’t – therefore I say, I decide.....

As we have already recalled Jesus is in Bethany, at the home of Mary, Martha and their brother Lazarus. Today’s story is the last episode in John’s gospel before Jesus heads for Jerusalem, and the events of that final week begin to unfold. In the midst of this meal at Bethany, Mary comes into the dining area with a bottle of expensive oil, the sort that was customarily used to anoint the dead before burial. She pours it lavishly over Jesus’ feet and then dries his feet with her hair. It is a costly gift, a generous gift, one that comes from her head, heart, and soul – quite unasked for, quite unexpected. This is Jesus the Lord of Life,

who had recently raised her brother Lazarus from the dead, and Mary treats the Lord of Life as if he were already a dead body.

We do not know how anyone in the house interpreted this extravagant gesture except for Judas. Judas asked the question that I expect many others there also wanted to ask. He asked the money question: would it not have been better to spend all that money on the poor and needy? A valid question, surely. Jesus had built much of his reputation on the way he accepted, fed, and healed people who were outside the acceptable social and economic circles of the day. Jesus' response to Judas is interesting, therefore. He tells Judas to leave Mary alone; she had bought the oil for the day of Jesus' burial. And Jesus' death comes into view on the horizon as he continues, "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." The admonition seems gentle, but perhaps if we listen carefully we can also hear a note of sharpness and certainly of poignancy.

In the house at Bethany, the poverty of the human Jesus becomes visible. Mary's extravagant gift of anointing is given to the one for whom there was no room at the inn at his birth, for whom there was precious little hospitality given during his lifetime, and for whom, in the end, there will be a borrowed tomb. Perhaps even more significantly, Mary's actions pre-figure those of Jesus over the coming days. As she knelt in humility to wipe his hair with her feet so Jesus will kneel at the feet of his disciples, washing their feet and exemplifying for them, and for us, the power of servant ministry. As she poured out the oil in an act of loving, but costly self-giving that opened her to ridicule and shame, so Jesus will pour out not oil, but his life in an act of loving, but costly self-giving that opened him to ridicule and shame.

As we enter into Passiontide we call on the God who as Isaiah reminds us today, is the one who gives life to the world, the God of the Exodus, the extraordinary God whom we see across the whole span of scripture. Today's gospel message is one of the power of love, of the love of self-giving, of unmeasured generosity, of acts of costly love that open the path to God. The God addressed by Walter Brueggemann in his prayer "On Generosity":

You come giving bread in the wilderness,
 You come giving children at the eleventh hour,
 You come giving homes to exiles,
 You come giving futures to the shut-down,
 You come giving Easter joy to the dead.

Susan Macdonald