



# *Fifth Sunday in Lent*

## *Sermon by Ven Moses Thabethe*



Sunday 3 April 2022

### READINGS

Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8

## *Love must be heard to have meaning*

Our Gospel text this Sunday, takes us to Bethany, on the outskirts of Jerusalem. It is important to understand that Jewish names of places have significance. For instance, Bethel means the house of God; Bethsaida means house of fish; Bethlehem means the house of bread and then we come to Bethany – the house of the poor or the afflicted. It is here that we get a glimpse of the significance of the story. According to the Gospel of Mark, for instance, Simon the Leper, lived in Bethany. And in John's Gospel, Jesus was asked to come to the aid of a man who lay dying in Bethany – the place of or the house of the afflicted – the house of the poor!

Jesus is at Bethany once again, at the house of Mary and Martha and Lazarus whom he had raised from the dead. This house should have been a house filled with mourning and sorrow, instead it is the centre of attention as the dead man and his saviour gather to eat. You can imagine that the people around would clearly want to see this Lazarus who had been raised after four days. Bethany is apparently, a small village only a few of kilometres from Jerusalem and it would also have been crowded with pilgrims who had come to observe the Passover in Jerusalem at this time. People would also have wanted to come closer to see this Jesus who had this extraordinary power over death, they would have wondered what he could do for them also?

Mary, the same Mary who had sat at the feet of Jesus as her sister Martha had been 'distracted with much serving, is once again centre stage. Once again Martha is serving, and once again Mary is captivated up with love and devotion, sitting at his feet. But now Mary springs into action. In one spontaneous, reckless and, some would say wasteful gesture of extravagance, she anoints the feet of Jesus with expensive perfume and wipes them with her hair! It's a very sensual, intimate, and a very shocking scene to those gathered around. For a woman to let her hair down in public in this way and behave towards Jesus with such physical intimacy must have provoked considerable attention and scorn. To let down her hair and massage the feet of Jesus with perfume is quite a highly emotional act in any culture, but at the time it was positively outrageous. We can all imagine how the disciples must have wanted to have a go at Mary for being such a disgrace and behaving in this shameless fashion.

Remember, this was no ordinary bottle of perfume but rather one costing a years salary. Can you imagine what you would have said had you witnessed this scene of such lavish adoration? Judas complained about the apparent waste and expressed what many only thought in their hearts when he said: "Why was this oil not sold for three hundred days' wages and given to the poor?"

The biblical account tells us that Judas was not really concerned about the poor, we are told that he was a thief and helped himself to the money that the disciples shared with Jesus. This explanation discredits Judas but perhaps it also serves to demonstrate that the other disciples too, perhaps felt that it was a waste of money which would legitimately have helped 'the poor.'

Judas challenged Mary on the grounds of extravagance, but we know from Matthew's Gospel that all of the disciples disliked the waste of perfume being used on Jesus. Matthew in his Gospel says When the disciples saw this, they were indignant. "Why this waste?" they asked. (Matthew 26:8) In Mark's Gospel too he records that it was "some who were there" who protested. (Mark 14:4), not just Judas! Truth be told, all of us would be appalled when we heard about this discourteous behaviour and flagrant waste. But Jesus defends Mary: "Leave her alone, " he says. "She is anointing me, making preparations for my death. "

Jesus knows how much Mary loves him, and he recognises the goodness in her devotional act of extravagant love. She loved Jesus, and she poured out her love like priceless perfume, without ever counting the cost. The perfume Mary poured out was worth a year's wages in those times, would we be prepared to pour out that kind of money on somebody we love? Would we be prepared to pour it out on Jesus? Mary had much to be thankful to Jesus for, he had raised her dead brother Lazarus from the dead, how could she deny Jesus her best perfume? What Mary did was highly provocative, but she was highly motivated and her spontaneous act of loving gratitude could not be inhibited by social etiquette. Mary responds to the love and acceptance she found in Jesus. Her affection for Jesus is an example to us all.

She gave Jesus not just words or promises about her love. She put those words into direct action. She did not consider the cost because her love was greater than financial considerations. Her response stands in contrast to that of the Chief Priests and Judas who will serve them in their wicked murder of Jesus. It is also a contrast to the behaviour of Peter and the disciples. In the Gospels Jesus is later pictured as abandoned by his inner circle of disciples. In the end it will be a few women who are left standing near Golgotha and who will venture to the tomb. The unlikely ones in the Gospel worldview of Mark and John's, the women, become the models of what it truly means to be a disciple of Jesus.

This is a deliberately rebellious passage, and reflects so much of the experience of Jesus' ministry. Others were so good, so devout, and so busy trying to be holy that they missed the point. This action made by the woman when she breaks the perfume container open and spreads the contents over Jesus' feet, speaks louder than a thousand words. In so anointing his feet, her actions spoke louder than words, she showed that love which is beyond that which words can express.

You know, Scientists say that while words go to the thinking part of the brain, smells-fragrances--go to the emotional part, the amygdala. That's why a whiff of perfume can conjure up all kinds of memories of the person we have known long after they have gone. I think Mary wanted to demonstrate that she loved him and that she understood, as he set his face toward Jerusalem and ultimately to the cross, the pain he was about to bear. She wanted to identify with him in the way that he had identified with her so long ago in her own struggles. Someone once said, "Love expressed is not sufficient; it needs to be heard to have any meaning." In other words, it is not adequate for you to say you love your wife or your husband or your partner or your children; though that's a good start. You must get into the mind of the beloved and find out what is most meaningful to them in receiving love and then give love in that way. Love expressed is not sufficient; it has to be heard to have any meaning. Mary expressed her love in this profound, lovely way, and Jesus obviously heard it and said that wherever the Gospel is preached, what Mary has done will always--be remembered.

All of us, while perhaps not driven to the extremes that Mary goes, have faced times in our lives where our bodies, minds, and spirits are pushed far beyond what we think we can endure. Sitting by the bedside of a loved one as she slowly succumbs to cancer. Bearing the pain of a spouse with dementia no longer recognizing us. The moment when we hear that our child has been in a terrible car accident. Battling through the pain of a chronic illness or debilitating injury that renders our own bodies deaf to our commands and consumed with pain. These moments when comfort and reason and relief seem like bizarre and foreign concepts happen to all of us.

And what gets us through those moments? Is it the moral high ground of Judas, the building up of our virtuous self-image through intensely practical good works? No, it is the abundant love of family and friends which keeps our hope up. It is the unrelenting love of God that reminds us that no matter what happens, we are never alone. Therefore, glory to God, whose power, resting in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to him from generation to generation, through Christ our Lord.

Amen