

Mary Anoints Jesus' Feet

John 12: 1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (...) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Today's gospel is the well-known story of Mary of Bethany, anointing the feet of Jesus with "a pound of costly perfumed oil made from genuine aromatic nard." What we have here is a gem among the Bible stories. A story full of sensuality, abundance, love, passion, and tenderness. A woman with a deep and genuine maybe even desperate determination to do the only good that still can be done.

In Jesus' time, the washing of someone's feet was an everyday thing to do. A host would offer water to a visitor so he or she could wash the dirty feet... Or a servant or slave would wash a guest's feet as he or she enters a house.

Anointing someone's feet with costly perfume though was not an everyday thing to do at all. Anointing did exist: for kings for example, and then the head was anointed. Or a dead body was anointed and made ready for the burial...

So, what Mary does is not common at all, it seems completely contrary to the customs and the rules, but she doesn't seem to care. What she does is totally unusual and counter-cultural (nobody would use perfume for the feet, a woman would not touch a man's feet, washing feet is a slave's job). It can only be explained if we see what Mary does as a show of utter devotion to Jesus.

Many commentators, with good reason, identify Mary of Bethany as the sister of Lazarus the man Jesus had just raised from the dead. Mary, Martha and Lazarus, the siblings at Bethany had their own household and were close friends of Jesus. They had no servants. Martha was waiting on the guests herself, and the ointment, Mary brought to the dinner place, must have cost a fortune.

What happens in our story is not logic but love. Unlimited, spontaneous and passionate affection towards a dearest of friends. The story shares with us the expression of Mary's great love. Her action flows from the deepest place in the heart.

At the climax of his life, so Mary knows, Jesus will give himself away totally, lavishly, holding nothing back.

Her gift.

His life.

Both are extravagant.

Today's story is the moment, when Jesus is being loved with a grace upon grace kind of love, an abundance of love, a love that you could even smell, with a fragrance that would linger for days...

Here in Bethany, Jesus finds himself in a serious and most significant phase of transition.

Immediately after Mary anoints Jesus, he will enter the city of Jerusalem. And so, Jesus needs enormous encouragement, passionate love, to do what he must do.

Mary's extravagant love for Jesus makes it possible for Jesus to show extravagant love in what follows — washing the feet of his disciples, handing himself over to be arrested in the garden, carrying his own cross, dying, rising, and ascending.

Mary loves Jesus into his future as the fulfilment of, "for God so loved the world."

In other words, Jesus needed Mary's love as much as she needed to show Jesus how much she loved him.

That's pretty much how love works.

How relationships work.

However difficult the job is that lies ahead, you can do what you must do, even want to do, because someone who loves you says: "Yes, you can do this."

Someone is loving you into your future.

Jesus is loved into his future by Mary, his devoted and over and over generous and passionate friend.

Do you know what I mean? Can we imagine what it feels like to love someone into their future, even a future that is uncertain, even a future that will mean suffering?

And what it means to be loved into your own future?

That without being loved into that future, you would have stayed where you were? ...wouldn't have been able to do your task, walk your way, fulfil your calling? But with someone who loves you unconditionally and believes in you – maybe more than you do, you can live the life you were born to whatever the cost.

And then there are always those who object to this kind of love. Who find it unnecessary, a little over-the-top...

Those who dismiss such love as wasteful, who think people are better off caring for themselves; that real strength means relying on individual independence rather than on the faithfulness, love and support of others.

That real power comes from trusting in your own autonomy and self-made success, rather than believing in the confidence and solidarity of others.

Along comes Judas.

One of these love resisters.
Thinking that love is something for the weak.
That tenderness and gentleness have no place in public and politics.
Thinking that what counts is what you achieve, and what you achieve alone.

Judas is one of those who do not know what love can do.
Who has never experienced unconditional and abundant love which you cannot deserve or earn, but which comes as a gift – just like that...

The way Mary loves, is much like the way God loves... The Mary kind of love can make all the difference in a person's life. All the difference in the world!

It did certainly make all the difference for Jesus who knew he was facing his death.

I think Jesus took Mary's love with him into Jerusalem.

I think he acted out her love when he washed the feet of his disciples, especially when he washed the feet of Judas about to betray him and those of Peter who would deny him.

I think he felt once again Mary's love, her gentle touch, when he was beaten.

I think he held on to Mary's love, desperately, when he hung on that cross.

And, I think he remembered Mary's love when he looked into his mother's eyes as she was standing there at the foot of the cross, when he said, "It is finished."

And, then, I think Jesus took all of that love into the tomb, all of that love that would then love him into his future as the resurrection and the life.

Mary anoints Jesus in a grand and extravagant gesture of uninhibited love. Though others criticize her, Jesus accepts her gift and affirms her love and faith.
Mary's kind of love... It makes me think.
How can I love others unexpectedly and "a bit over the top"?
How can I be a gift to others?
...make all the difference in the world? So that others can through my love live through whatever life holds in store for them?

Mary shows me how to love people into their future... And my desire is that I may learn to love so too. Amen.