

Fifth Sunday in Lent

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Introduction

Let's take a moment to think about gifts

- What is the most memorable gift you have received?
- Why does it stick out in your memory?
- In giving a gift to someone you love, what is it you hope to convey?
- What makes a gift appropriate?
- What makes a gift inappropriate?

By way of background

The writer of John's Gospel wrote with the intention of leading readers to belief in Jesus as Christ and Son of God. (John 20.30-31: "But these [signs] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.") John is different from the other three (synoptic) Gospels. It has a high proportion of original material, and the stories that are parallel often contain more detail and are presented quite differently.

Today's reading is a good example. Mark (14:3-9) and Matthew (26:6-13) tell of a woman who anoints Jesus's head with costly perfume, the disciples protest at the 'waste', and Jesus rebukes them saying that this is a preparation of his body for burial. Luke (7:36-50) tells a different story in which a sinful woman anoints Jesus's feet. Jesus contrasts her generosity with the lack of hospitality shown him by Simon, his host, and Jesus publicly forgives the woman's sin.

John frequently uses the contrast of opposites in a highly literary style, he loves symbols and signs, appealing to the imagination and empathy of his audience. The writer of John's Gospel adapts sources to serve the purpose of bringing readers to faith.

So, why has the writer given us this story, in this way?

Text

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?' (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) 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.'

Comment

At the heart of our reading is an act of anointing, an expression of the most extraordinary generosity. But before considering this amazing gift to Jesus it is worth noting the way John's Gospel tells the story.

Context

As is typical of John, the story is laced with multiple suggestions that fill out the symbolic interpretation. Firstly, it is 'six days before the Passover'. The writer makes it impossible for us not to see that this event foreshadows the cross. The anointing is a preparation for death – Jesus's 'hour has come'. The anointing also expresses John's gospel's view of the cross as portraying both Jesus' death and exaltation. Anointing is part of the consecration of a king or priest, so by this anointing Jesus is declared king and priest. In John's telling of the trial of Jesus, the Kingship of Jesus is repeatedly referred to. Anointing is also used for healing, and as Lazarus was present at the meal, we are reminded that he was brought back to life by Jesus, and in turn this prefigures the resurrection of Jesus. This is all part of the rich symbolic backdrop to the tapestry whose central subject is Mary's gift to Jesus.

Mary's Gift and Judas' response

Mary's act of extraordinary generosity is in the context of hospitality and a shared meal. Martha and Mary have invited Jesus and his disciples for a meal. This family had a close personal relationship with Jesus. Lazarus is present as a focus for gratitude to Jesus who brought Lazarus back to life. Martha serves the meal she has prepared, her particular act of gratitude. But it is Mary's extravagance in using such costly perfume to anoint Jesus's feet that holds our attention ... and so offends Judas, 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' The perfume would have cost almost a year's salary for a manual worker!!

Here we have a highly charged conflict. Mary's costly generosity is targeted as being a waste, but more, it is morally wrong as it squandered the opportunity of doing good for so many needy people. Does Judas not have a point? Should we take Judas's side in this conflict?

Can we understand Jesus's response to Judas, which literally from the Greek means 'Leave her alone so that she may keep it [the perfume] for the day of my burial.' You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.' I am not sure, but to me it seems that this perfume may have been acquired for the body of Lazarus at the time of his death, and is now given to Jesus as an act of profound

gratitude.

However, it is worth noting in passing that the response of Jesus to Judas is gentle considering the heat of the moment! 'Leave her alone...' 'Come off it, Judas!' perhaps.

However, the writer of John's gospel can't help himself and he has a go at Judas: 'He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it' (John 12:6). The writer has taken sides in this conflict – whereas Jesus intervenes to calm the tension.

But how can we understand what follows when Jesus supports Mary like this: 'You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me'? Jesus was probably referring to a passage in Deuteronomy that condemns a grudging attitude to the care of those in need and a constant attitude of liberal generosity to the poor 'since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth.' (Deuteronomy 15:11). Jesus is not excusing anyone from the need to care for those in need, this should be our way of life!

The core of Judas's dispute with Mary is that he felt it would have been more valuable to sell the perfume and give the money to the poor, than waste the perfume anointing Jesus for no good reason. So what value did Mary's act have.

First, Mary's action was prompted by gratitude and faith. I imagine it was just something Mary felt she should do. It wasn't so much thought out, but knowing Jesus as she did, it felt right. It wasn't a matter of belief or head knowledge (she can't have known what was to happen to Jesus within a week), it was a matter of the heart. In the light of Jesus's death, her act symbolizes a central theme in John, that of Jesus's kingship through his death and exaltation. As with so many others who placed their trust in Jesus and were commended for their faith, Mary is commended for what she did.

From John's perspective, Mary's anointing, the wiping of Jesus's feet with her hair, prefigured the last act of Jesus with his disciples when Jesus washed his disciples feet. Is it possible that Jesus got the idea that a way of symbolising generous service for his disciples was to adapt what Mary had done when she anointed his feet with perfume?

If this is so, Mary's act of extravagant generosity was instrumental in forming the template of how the disciples of Jesus should love others.

What we do know is that an act of generosity has the potential of 'seeding' further acts of generous service. Here I believe we touch the heart of today's reading. Do you agree?

Response

Judas prejudices Mary's action, without fully understanding her motivation and the significance of the act. Can you think of a time when you have fallen into that trap of jumping to incorrect conclusions in judging other people? What can be done not to succumb to this temptation?

An assumption that lies behind this story is that Jesus accepted the presence of Judas as one of his close group of disciples. Judas is accused of being a thief. Did Jesus know? Or was it enough for Jesus that Judas, flawed as he was, wanted to be a disciple? His imperfections did not bar him from being one of those who were closest to Jesus throughout his ministry. What qualifies us to be called 'Christian'?

The question of a single extravagant act, or giving to the poor? Are you aware of parallels to this question today about how we, personally or collectively as a church, allocate resources?

Prayer

Open hearted God,
Jesus created an inclusive community of disciples
Each with gifts, faults and strengths and weaknesses.
We give you thanks that your generous inclusion
Is extended to the likes of us.
May we be transformed by your loving concern
That like Mary, we may be extravagantly generous
In the service of others.

Amen