

## **SERMON: Sunday – 3 April 2022 – Rev Alistair Cowper**

### **The Fragrance of Love**

Philippians 3:4b-14

John 12:1-8

All four Gospels tell this story — of a woman who kneels at Jesus's feet, breaks an alabaster jar filled with priceless perfume, and dares to love Jesus in the flesh. Hands to feet. Hair to skin. One Bible commentator calls it "one of the most sensual, tender, and provocative in the New Testament.

In John's version, the woman is Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and the newly resurrected Lazarus. The two sisters host a dinner party for Jesus, and it's during the festivities that Mary breaks open her jar, anoints Jesus with spikenard (a scented oil worth a year's wages) and wipes his feet with her hair. The Greek is myrrh, the perfumed oil gifted at Jesus birth and pointing here to his death.

As the musky fragrance of the oil fills the house, Judas — the disciple who "keeps the common purse," rebukes Mary for her scandalous generosity: "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" But Jesus silences him: "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."

I can't read this story without that modern hymn coming to mind,

You are beautiful beyond description  
Too marvellous for words  
Too wonderful for comprehension  
Like nothing ever seen or heard  
Who can grasp your infinite wisdom  
Who can fathom the depth of your love  
You are beautiful beyond description  
Majesty enthroned above  
And I stand, I stand in awe of you ...

It's right to stand in awe of God but here we have an embodied story which very much exposes to us the vulnerability, or the humanity of God.

Of God getting real.

Of God receiving love through the flesh to flesh touch of a sinful human being. (Only Luke uses the word sinful).

But Judas' point seems well made - on the surface. Surely the Rabbi Jesus should be seen to be making wise use of resources in meeting the needs of those in real need? No room here for necessary expense or even wastefulness.

Mary's use of her gift is lavish. Its wasteful? Its extravagant?

But its also Precious. And its accepted by Jesus.

Because beautiful, extravagant acts matter in the Kingdom of God. And in this moment, it matters more so than a disembodied giving to the poor "out there".

Debie Thomas writes about this act of Mary's that,  
"Her perfume is her protest. Her scented hands are her declaration. In anointing Jesus in beauty, she declares that the stench of death will not have the last word in our lives — the last word will belong to the sweet and sacred fragrance of love."

Judas criticism of Mary's act is the sort of word that kills. His word is the stench of death in the room.

Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor?

John tells us that it wasn't because he cared for the poor. It was because he was greedy.

A wee word of caution. There is no doubt something of Judas in us all. We are both capable of being good and bad at the same time. Caring for the poor sometimes, yet at other times ignoring the poor, or worse being part of the cause of inequality in life.

But there's something of Mary in all of us too.

Jesus defends Mary, and his rebuke to Judas, "you will always have the poor" harks back to the OT book of Deuteronomy 15:11,

"There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded".

He's not saying the poor don't matter. But he seems to be saying that there is something else going on here that matters too.

There's no doubt that Jesus was poor. He was numbered among the poor people in the land and so by law even should have been met with openhanded generosity. And here we see he was being met with

openhanded generosity. Not by Judas and the upholders of the law but by Mary.

Jesus said to them, You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me' (8).

It's not to say, he won't always be with us. But maybe this says that we might miss the opportunity if we delay. Jesus might have moved on. And to that extent, we might not always have him with us.

So act while you have the opportunity. Don't delay because some pious alternative out there" holds you back. Act on the need before you and don't let the need somewhere else "out there" hold you back from acting now. Ministry is first and foremost administered through the touch needed before us, the holding of the hand of a dying friend, the being with the sufferer or whatever the need is.

[I'm not saying charity begins at home and one would never feel called to send aid abroad. Just let's not miss the need that is presented before us.]

Jesus had a need to be comforted ahead of his death and burial. Mary saw it and helped to meet it. Yes it was thanksgiving for how Jesus had raised her brother from the dead. But it was heartfelt devotion and, as Jesus put it, preparation for my burial, given in advance, while he was still able to smell the fragrance and feel the soothing on the skin with the tears and the touch of her hair.

And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

No room for the smell of death or poverty. The house was filled with the fragrance of love.

We are called to extravagant, limitless love whenever the poor are with us, which is always.

Love needs to be embodied to be real. I was listening to Martin Fair last week and his podcast episode called Call the midwife and he was talking about that.

He spoke about a line in one of the episodes of call the midwife that said, "hope has arrived, in the person of Phyllis". He said a similar thing about love needing to be embodied.

In other words, hope isn't hope unless you can touch it, see it, smell it, feel it hear it. Likewise with love or with faith.

Faith, hope, love, all need to be embodied. It is delivered through the touch or sight or sound of a friend. Sometimes even through the smell from a friend - might be nice perfume, or might be flowers for example!

How often have we needed a healing word to hear or touch to feel or a pleasant aroma to smell.

At this time of year we can be struck as we walk past a tree opening up its blossom and catch the sweetness of its perfume.

And likewise, when someone sends us a word of encouragement, or offers a hand of friendship. It's love enfleshed. And it matters.

Mary, wiped Jesus feet with her hair. No doubt she kissed them.  
And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume

I wonder, when and where are the opportunities before each of us, with the Risen Jesus in our midst, to break our own alabaster jars, as it were, and let the fragrance out?