

Sermon: Pure worship
John 12:1-8
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We are in the season of Good Friday and Easter. Next week we celebrate Palm Sunday. We remember that the great and loving God became man in Jesus Christ; He even died for us, for the forgiveness of our sins; then He rose again, opening up eternal life for us all.

What is our proper response to this amazing love of God?

Just a few days before Jesus would be crucified, he had arrived in the village called Bethany, just a few kilometres outside Jerusalem. We meet with Jesus in a house where people held a diner party to honour Jesus.

And there we meet his friends Lazarus, Martha and Mary. This is not Mary the mother of Jesus, and not Mary Magdalene, but Mary, sister of Lazarus and Martha.

Mary's joy

Mary is the central person in the event that St John describes. John himself was at that diner party as an eyewitness.

Mary is the main person in the story – but interestingly, we do not hear her speak one word. We read words of John, and his interpretation of what happened at that diner party. We hear words of Judas, that awful traitor. And we hear Jesus speak. But Mary is silent.

But we know a few things about her. She must have been deeply joyful when Jesus came to Bethany, because Jesus is the one who had raised her brother Lazarus from the dead, just very recently.

Many people had witnessed that moment when Lazarus come out of his grave; they saw that this happened at the command of Jesus: 'Lazarus, come out!' No wonder John, an eyewitness, recalls that "many of the Jews who [...] had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him." (John 11:45)

More than anyone else, of course Martha and Mary believed in Jesus. He had given them their brother back. And now Jesus was in Bethany, close to them, and they loved him so much!

Mary must also have been infected with the joy of the feast of Easter. The area around Jerusalem, including Bethany, was full of happy people. This was the great feast of the Jews! Fathers, mothers, boys and girls would go all the way to Jerusalem, from all over Israel and beyond, for killing a sheep for the forgiveness of their sins.

Jesus and his disciples were in the house, with other people, and they were enjoying their evening diner. At a good party, people would not sit on chairs, but they would recline on sofas. Those would be positioned in such a way that people would face the tables in the centre with their heads. Their feet were all on the outside of the circle. They would rest on their left elbow, and with their right hand they would take the food from the tables in the centre.

In order to make sure that all guests always had enough to eat and drink, Martha was serving. That is how we have met her before in the Bible! Martha showed her love for Jesus by working hard, by serving. That was her main language of love. While Mary was more the person to quietly adore Jesus by being with him; that was her major love language.

So Mary was very joyful. Jesus was close to her again.

Mary's devotion

I am not sure whether it was all joy for Mary. Just a few more days and Jesus would be killed. Murder was in the air. Just as hundreds of thousands of sheep were slaughtered, Jesus, the Lamb of God was to be killed. And He had often spoken about this to his friends – so Mary knew about it

When Mary poured the Nard, the precious ointment on Jesus, He said that she did this to prepare for his burial. Most of the disciples did not seem to understand or believe those words of Jesus about his coming death. Mary seems to have understood.

Ephrem the Syrian, an important hymn writer and theologian from the 4th century, wrote (in his Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron 17:7-8)

[Jesus] restored Lazarus to life and died in his stead. For after He had drawn [Lazarus] from the tomb and had seated himself at the table with him, he was himself buried by the symbol of the ointment that Mary poured. [...]

Mary never speaks much; maybe she was a good listener and she understood what was about to happen to her beloved Lord.

Did Mary realize something of this sacrificial love of Jesus her Lord who was to die for humankind? In any case, her love and worship were ex-

travagant. She gave Jesus massively much as an expression of what was in her heart.

She poured 300 denarii worth of Nard on the feet of Jesus. The Latin coin was called a denarius – the word that would be adopted in the Arabian Gulf and elsewhere for their currency as dinar.

It was pure Nard, John writes. According to most commentators, this was the Nard that came from the Himalayas, from Northern India. It had to be carried by camel for thousands of kilometres, then taken by boat from the Indian coast to what is now Kuwait. Then it went again with camels via Iraq to Lebanon and Israel. This long trip made it very expensive.

300 denarii was the equivalent of a year's salary. We know this, because elsewhere in the Gospels we read that at that time, one denarius was the salary for one day of work in the fields.

In the Greek text of the Gospel of John we read that the bottle of Nard was 'one litre', that is about 330 grams. And Mary poured it all on the feet of Jesus. How valuable Jesus was for her! Her love for him, her worship for him, made her not think twice. All she had she gave to him.

Our service and our worship of our Lord can never be cheap; true service and worship are costly because our Lord asks all. True love leads us to be very generous with God and with our fellow-men.

Usually balm would be poured over someone's head. Mary worshipped at the feet of Jesus, totally humble. Cleaning the feet of people was a slave's work. Mary even untied her hair – something no woman of respect would ever do in public in Israel.

It is as if a Salafi woman, fully veiled, takes off her veil in public, and unties her hair. Shameful!

But Mary was not concerned with what people might think. In her devotion for Jesus she lost all awareness of her environment. She did not care about her own honour; she laid even that at the feet of Jesus.

Many Christians are so self-conscious about their faith in Christ, worried of what people may think. Well, true love does not worry so much, just as lovers may be sitting in a restaurant without caring what people around them say or do. They are lost in each other.

Mary's love for her Lord, her service to Him, her worship of Him, it did cost her everything. She did not calculate; she did not worry; she did not hesitate. Lavishly she poured not just her ointment but herself at Jesus' feet. "Take my life and let it be, consecrated all to thee..." How much do you feel serving the Lord in your pocket?

Martha, Mary's sister, was working hard, serving at the table of Jesus. She expressed her love by those actions. Martha must have laughed when Mary poured that precious Nard on the feet of Jesus. "Yes Lord, this is how much we love you. We work hard to serve you, we give you all we have to please you. Lord, we worship you!"

St Athanasius of Alexandria said this in one of his sermons:

Martha was taking great care with the service and was ministering to Christ with all her heart. Mary was seated at the feet of Jesus and kissing them... Christ beholds them both with his divine eyes and is glad and rejoices over the purity of the lifestyle and the offering to him of their undefiled service.

Martha and Mary can both count on some critique from observers. This often happens to people who devote their whole life to Jesus Christ. It happens to people who live lavishly for him. Whose whole heart is focused on our Lord.

"Is living your life for the sake of Jesus Christ not a waste of your time? Is giving your money for the sake of Jesus Christ not a waste of your money? Be reasonable! Sure, believe in God, but do not become extreme!" That is what we sometimes hear people say.

And maybe you also think this every now and then. How much may it cost you financially to follow Jesus Christ? How much time? How much of your life?

Mary's defence

That was exactly the attack by Judas on this act of great love by Mary. "So much honour, so much love, such expensive service to God, that is too much!"

Judas is angry at Mary for her extravagant love for her Lord. He rejects the idea that our Lord deserves and demands all of our lives.

Jesus had given everything to Judas. He had been so gracious. Jesus had appointed Judas as an apostle; he had given him responsibility as the treasurer of the disciples; Jesus washed Judas' feet; he made him share in his last meal.

Jesus did all he could to save Judas, but Judas' heart had been petrified. From so much love of Jesus, any normal heart would melt. Not Judas. He was too greedy. He wanted too much for himself.

For Judas, this action of Mary was just a waste of money. Now we know that Judas, as the treasurer, liked much money to go through his accounts, because he could help himself to some of it. But aside from this bad motive, what about his argument that the money could be given to the poor?

In the other Gospels we read that the other disciples made similar comments. So the idea was not so strange.

We work hard at serving Jesus by our practical deeds; We worship God by our pure and costly devotion; we serve God by serving the poor.

Judas did not understand much about devotion to God and Jesus Christ, as we see from his response to the devotion of Mary. He was inconsiderate to Jesus and cruel to Mary. Tragic that Judas called this devotion of Mary a waste. Mary gave 300 denarii for the worship of Jesus; for only 10% of this, for 30 denarii, Judas betrayed Jesus a week after this incident.

Mary did not defend herself when she was criticized for her love for Jesus. Jesus defended her. "Leave her alone", he says.

Leave her alone, because her action is for the sake of love for Jesus, and we can never overdo love for him. How can we ever be critical of generosity for the sake of God. Love always gives more.

Jesus is not at all against supporting poor people. He often tells his followers to do just that. If you have two shirts and someone is naked, give him your shirt. Our behaviour to poor people should be marked by the same generosity as our love for God.

Jesus is critical of Judas because he proposes that support for the poor should take the place of love and worship and adoration of God. It is a matter of priorities.

St Kirolos of Alexandria, in his Commentary on the Gospel of John, wrote:

Nothing is better than devotion to Jesus. For love for the poor is very praiseworthy, only let it be put after veneration of God.

Christian social activism, even that which meets real needs, sometimes masks a spirit that knows nothing of worship and adoration. And God does ask for our pure adoration. Christian service to God, and worship, must always have this adoration as its heart.

By the way, think about the defence of Mary by Jesus. Jesus claims that devotion and worship for him has priority over serving the poor.

If a mere mortal man would claim such priority, he would be very ill in his mind or unspeakably arrogant. But Jesus knew that he did deserve the same honor as God does. And therefore to honour him has priority over caring for the poor.

That is, by the way, even better for the poor. Honouring God actually purifies our motives for true service to the poor. Adoration for Jesus Christ lifts him up, it humbles us, and it puts us in the place where we also have the psychological freedom to honour other people and lift them up. Then our help for the poor is not condescending, but uplifting for them.

Conclusion

Jesus defends Mary, and in a sense, so does John, who wrote the story as an eyewitness. John remembered that the fragrance of the Nard filled the whole house. Her lovely deed to Jesus was pleasant for all, and even today we speak of it, honouring Mary for her love.

And we speak about her as an example of how we are to adore God, Father Son and Holy Spirit, with all of our heart and with all that we possess.

Amen