

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
Sunday 17 March, Lent 5
Isaiah 43:16-21, Psalm 126, John 12: 1-8
Rev. Anneke Oppewal

“A Spendthrift Lover”

May I speak in the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

This morning we read a story about a woman and a man, costly perfume, and an intimate gesture of love.....

The man is Jesus, a holy man, bringing peace, healing and wholeness to people. A righteous man, full of God’s love, full of the power of the Holy Spirit. A man sharing a meal with his friends at the house of friends, one of whom he has brought back from the grave not long before.

A man living under the cloud of looming disaster and certain death at the hands of people that are planning his execution because they think it “prudent” to be rid of him. (John 11:50)

A lonely man, traveling with a group of friends who fail to understand what he is about. A man who is trying to prepare his friends for suffering and death that he knows lies ahead, and comfort them with the certainty of new beginnings afterwards.

To quote Isaiah: ‘A man despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; one from whom people will turn away.’ (Isaiah 53:3-5)

The woman is Mary, the sister of Lazarus, perhaps the same Mary that is in other gospels is called a sinful woman (Luke 7: 36,37), possibly the same woman who was healed from evil spirits by Jesus (Luke 8:2).

They are surrounded by friends, looking on from a distance. Silent except for one: “We could have sold that and given it to the poor!” says Judas, the thief and traitor. Not because of the poor but of his own greed.

Surrounded also by Pharisees and other dignitaries who have come to see the miracle: Lazarus, raised from the dead, a walking, talking testimony of Jesus’ power, of what God can do, of what is still in store for Jesus at this stage.

And around that, outside the house, waiting for Jesus’ attention, from a world full of violence, need, and pain, are many crying out for healing, crowding in on Jesus with every step he takes. A world where, at the same time some, jealous, hateful and angry people plan the death of this gentle healing and life affirming man.

Nard was a very costly perfume that was imported from India. 300 denarii worth was about the average annual wage of a skilled laborer, about \$50.000 in today's money, all packaged neatly in a pint size alabaster jar. Imagine someone turning up and pouring the equivalent of 100 liters of Chanel 5 perfume over someone's feet, with an aroma that would probably been as potent as well.

Two poor families could have lived comfortably on the amount of money wasted. A soup kitchen could have been set up, feeding probably more than 5000 with bread and fish. A hospital, support for lepers, the possibilities with that kind of money is mind boggling!

But that's not all. Spike nard is a "brand" of perfume that speaks of more than just extravagant and irresponsible wasting.

Nard was used for the anointing of Kings. And that is why it was one of the gifts the wise men from the East brought when they followed the star to the King born in Bethlehem.

It was also used (in much smaller quantities) by any well to do couple preparing for their wedding night. Perhaps while reciting the romantic poetry of the Song of songs where nard is part of the passionate love making of two true lovers.

It was also used, sparingly, by expensive prostitutes to surround an act of love for sale with the heavy scent of luxurious indulgence.

And last but definitely not least: It was a perfume that played a part in the preparing of a loved one for burial, if the family of the deceased could afford it.

It is a perfume that speaks volumes in a story where words are only very sparingly used. And Mary's pouring it out so abundantly over Jesus' feet speaks volumes too.

Just before Jesus' friends are to burst into loud hosannas, when Jesus enters Jerusalem, waving palm leaves and rolling out a carpet of cloaks to welcome him, Mary pours a quantity of spike nard over Jesus' feet more than fit for a great King, recognising the journey he is on as a royal one, worthy of reverence and adoration.

From the richness of extravagant love Mary pours a fortune over the feet of her beloved. Wiping them with her unbound hair in utter and intimate rapture. A gesture that many would have felt, at the time, inappropriate and more fitted to the privacy of a bedroom, between man and wife, or between passionate lovers. Definitely not something to put on display, for everyone to see. An excessive and improper gesture.

Unbinding her hair in the presence of a group of men would be a sure sign of Mary's deprivation. Even if she wasn't to be identified with the prostitute from some of the other stories. It was a gesture others would possibly be willing to pay for in the privacy of a dark back room, it was one of the tools of the trade of a prostitute, used to express her profound love for a man who could hardly be expected to be pleased with such a gesture.

This makes the story far more shocking than most of us would at first sight think!

Last but not least, and this is what Jesus takes up, Mary prepares her Lord for burial long before anybody else in the room has had the courage to face up to the reality of his impending violent death. In spite of Jesus himself who has been preparing them for his passion and death for a while now.

Deep felt love, a desire to express it, a courageous acknowledgment of what is about to happen (only six days in John between this anointing and the cross), an unbound generosity which must have seemed to others completely out of proportion with the occasion and the relationship of Mary and her friend and master.

“You could have given it to the poor.....”

You could at least have tried to solve a few of the world’s problems. Instead of embarrassing yourself, Jesus and us, his followers, by this silly wasting of resources.

Mary however, only sees the man. Sees Jesus, whom she must have loved deeply. The man who raised her brother from the dead. The man who changed her life, that of her sister and brother and many others. A man who is now desperately lonely, facing a journey that will lead him through worse than hell. Not understood by his friends, hated by his enemies, doing nothing but good, ready to bear his cross and drink the cup that is being prepared for him.

And she acts. She pushes all convention aside, brushes past the shocked faces of those attending the meal, and gives as generously as God Himself has given to her.

She gives a fortune, but not only that, she gives herself, all she has got, all she has to offer, all she is, and was, all her insight and understanding, all the support she can muster, all the pastoral care her imagination gives her to give to this man she loves so much.

Mary discerns a great need in Jesus, and rightly so. She is the first and only one in the gospel that faces the truth of what is coming and puts herself beside him to support him in his hour of need. She is a woman with a deep intuition and a pure and true understanding of the agony this man is going to go through. Is going through at that very moment. His eyes on the cross, his friends in denial.

Shouldn’t the poor be helped first? Could she not just have said a few encouraging words? A supportive nod maybe? Wouldn’t that have done? Would half not have been enough? A quarter have conveyed the message?

“The poor will always be with you, but you do not always have me” says Jesus, “she kept this for my burial.....”

She’s understood, is what Jesus says, and by her extravagant gesture I know that she’s understood to the full extent of my suffering. She’s looked past today and seen a future

you lot cannot imagine yet. She's faced death, and burial, and the agony of losing me, her friend and saviour. But beyond that the resurrection, her brother Lazarus a foretaste of what is to come, she has crowned me King, thrown herself at my feet, long before I will be lifted up and sit at the right hand of the father who will put the world under the feet she has anointed and wiped with her hair in a gesture of utter submissiveness.

It is all there, in this one gesture of Mary. The anointing of the King, the salvation of sinners, the suffering and death of her Lord, the love and surrender of a true disciple. Something the others cannot yet see, something Judas even smirks at.

"The poor will always be with you".

When faced with the reality of the cross, the cost of the love Jesus lived out, all other considerations become irrelevant. For those who want to follow Jesus through to Easter, the ultimate choice is complete surrender of all they are and all they have. To die with him to self, to caution, to propriety, and to give recklessly and excessively from whatever they may have received.

"The poor will always be with you"

Hasn't Jesus said that it is in the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the lonely, the captives, we meet him? Doesn't that mean that this is a call to tend to him in them in the same way Mary tended to him in that last week of his life on earth?

To give recklessly and excessively to whoever we meet in Jesus today? And bear witness to our faith with extravagance and recklessness?

Murder, violence, injustice, grief, bereavement, death. Nothing much has changed. The world where Mary expresses her love and Jesus travels to the cross not so very different from the world that is surrounding us today.

The passionate love and care of one makes all the difference to the other though. An example worth following.

Not to hold back where our Lord is concerned, but to love recklessly and generously, as he loves us. Amen.