

## **Contemporary reflection on John 12:1-8 April 6<sup>th</sup> 2025**

Can you recall a time when you gave an expensive gift, a gift so expensive that it caused a disturbance to someone who you thought you knew well. Within that memory, can you also recall what your motivation was for you to give such a gift? I would hope it was because of an immense love for the person that you were willing to show your devotion through a sacrificial love you have for them. Whilst it made you happy, your act disturbed someone else to the point of feeling like they needed to reprimand you. They just couldn't see the real value or gains in your action – just a financial loss.

Here we are just a few short weeks before we will gather on Maundy Thursday, experience the great depth of lows of Christ's crucifixion on Good Friday. However, this week we're in Bethany the place where Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, extravagantly anoints the feet of Jesus with a very expensive perfume. Looking at this through the lens of 2025 I hope to take you on a journey not only of the story but also its broader implications on how we engage with our spirituality, economic inequality and the nature of true worship.

I don't wish to bring gender into the equation, I am very happy to say that outdated thought and treatment of women not being accepted in a ministry role is fading, however there remains a negative attitude amongst some men and surprisingly women against women in ministry leadership. I only mention it because from a contemporary perspective, our reading provides an invitation to look at societal values, particularly regarding material wealth and its perceived relevance to our spirituality – as we well know most if not all of the wealth is distributed to others by men, and most of the highly

respected theologians and academics are also men. What I find interesting is that the few women who do engage in sharing their wealth with organisations are disrespected and verbally abused because of their wealth.

Mary's breaking of the alabaster jar filled with expensive perfume can be interpreted as a radical rejection of social expectations and norms surrounding wealth, status as to who is given permission to be achievers, and how we interact with each other. In our modern era spiritual challenges are found everywhere, especially as we are continually looking into how we carefully care for our world environment in a way that's sustainable. Mary's act of breaking the jar to wash the feet of Jesus may have been seen by those watching as an act of waste and irresponsible behaviour. Instead, we could view it as Mary representing and deeply acknowledging the transient nature of life and worldly possessions. In a society increasingly driven by consumerism, Mary's choice to pour out her wealth as an offering to Jesus speaks to the necessity of prioritising spiritual fulfillment over material wealth.

As we look at and critique Judas Iscariot's reaction, we do it with an acknowledgement of thousands of years of academic and theological research, interpretations and perspectives. Judas' admonition emphasising the high financial value of the perfume which could have been sold for the poor's benefit, highlights a tension that resonates with today's socio-economic conversations on social media, TV, influencers, newspapers, etcetera. Judas' objection reflects a utilitarian viewpoint that prioritises financial gains, community status, and power over and above compassion, empathy and empowerment to those who are considered to be

inferior. His worldly view is above spirituality and disappointingly our relationship with Christ who emphasises humility.

In the face of Mary's soul deep love and devotion Judas presents us with a voice of rationality that ironically totally misses the essence of authentic and sincere worship. This dynamic requires us to reflect on how we as the body of Christ in 2025 grapple with a sacrificial faith driven life as opposed to just living a rational life where financial benefits and status sometimes lead us to put to the side any genuine expressions of our love and devotion for the risen Christ Jesus throughout our lives and how we live and lean into our faith.

Mary's actions can also be interpreted through a lens of our individual needs and well-being are the most important things where authenticity is a key factor. By anointing Jesus, Mary publicly epitomizes an authentic expression of her relationship with him. Her vulnerability and willingness to act outside the social norm of the day reveal to us a deep and personal "come what may" attitude of personal conviction that transcends any expectation of those who witnessed her humility and language of love. In today's context, this cultural shift towards personal authenticity should encourage us to also seek genuine connections and expressions of faith that are less about always being comfortable in our familiarity, and more about allowing ourselves to be transformed and ready for our personal encounter with God, engage with the Holy Spirit and be in unity with the body of Christ as we gather to worship the living Christ Jesus.

John brings us to an understanding of sacrificial love, which is a centerpiece of who we are as followers of Jesus. Today, the concept of sacrificial love poses questions about the nature of giving and

selflessness. What does it look like to those who don't understand what we are saying and doing when we offer ourselves and our resources in a selfish world overshadowed by arrogance and self-importance.

Mary's act of anointing Jesus is an indication of the ultimate sacrifice Jesus would make on our behalf. When we put the two things side by side, we can soon see how intertwined the two are – to love oftentimes requires us to sacrifice something of ourselves to show how real and authentic our love and devotion is. This may be seen quite challenging to some in today's era as we take into consideration the implications of our own actions and the extent to which we are willing to make sacrifices for others – a call to extend empathy and social responsibilities which are relevant to our faith and how we live in Christ's covenant to love all people even our enemies in a world that so is often fractured.

It isn't until we get to the end of the passage that we hear Jesus come to the defense of Mary's love language. He tells them quite straight out and simply – there will always be poor people in the world, that isn't going to change, however, what will change is that Jesus won't always be with them. They have to learn to live in the way of Christ's teachings without Christ's physical presence among them. What Jesus said serves us as well. Jesus gives us the reason why we need to continually reflect on ourselves, we need to recognise that there will be times when we need to go off and allow ourselves to reconnect with the Holy Spirit at a deeper level, give ourselves a minute to sit in silence amongst our chaotic lives so we can hear where Christ is calling us to go, or to do, and even more to tend to our own spirituality.

Jesus is inviting us to worship in a similar way to what Mary's doing, cherish and prioritise our sacred moments which hold immense significance for each of us. I emphasise that our worship of God can happen anywhere at any time.

I finish my contemporary reflection on today's reading where John reveals the complexities of worship and authentic devotion against the backdrop of societal expectations, economic considerations, and an often-secular society. Mary's anointing of Jesus challenges us to reflect and evaluate what our priorities are and where we place them on our pathway of faith, trust, love and sacrifice which are often not in alignment with others we mix with. Ultimately, Jesus calls us into a soul-deep and personal transformative spiritual engagement with him, which enables us to transcend traditions as we each cultivate a faith defined by love, sacrifice and an authentic connection.