

\*\*\*\*\*

<sup>1</sup> Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup> So they gave a dinner for Him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with Him at table. <sup>3</sup> Mary therefore took a half litre of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped His feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.... <sup>7</sup> Jesus said, "Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of My burial. <sup>8</sup> For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have Me." John 12:1-3, 7

\*\*\*\*\*

As we gather this day, for us two weeks before the great celebrations of Jesus death and resurrection, the account of Mary anointing the feet of Jesus stands out at many levels.

As we begin to reflect on this, image a wonderful meal that you have attended. Meal times together are important. Researchers have studied meal times and noted the benefits of eating together at many levels. For starters, researchers found that for young children, dinnertime conversation boosts vocabulary. Other researchers reported a consistent association between family dinner frequency and teen academic performance. Adolescents who ate family meals five to seven times a week were twice as likely to get A's in school as those who ate dinner with their families fewer than two times a week. Meal times together in a genuinely loving and caring environment are important in many ways.

However, as we reflect on Mary anointing the feet of Jesus there is another theme to keep in mind. This is six days before the Passover... it is the week before Jesus' death... And so there is a theme of dealing with death and dying.

Death and dying is something we are all familiar with in one way or another. The pioneering work of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's "On Death and Dying" challenged many in her time. Kübler-Ross wrote not only a psychological treatise, but a work filled with accounts of interviews with many who were dying. Her aim was manifold. She wanted those in the medical profession to take into account the personal situation of those who were dying. "On Death and Dying" sparked changes to prevailing assumptions and expectations that transformed clinical practice within very few years. No longer were dying patients relegated to hospital rooms at the far end of the hall. On Death and Dying is credited with giving rise to the hospice movement—and, by extension, the new specialty of hospice and palliative medicine.

In On Death and Dying Kübler-Ross also famously highlighted 'stages' 'grief and loss': denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Popularised by some as Kübler-Ross's "stages of dying," they have been

criticised for suggesting a formulaic progression of phases through the dying process. But anyone familiar with Kübler-Ross' work will know she made it clear that these emotional states occur in a variety of patterns.

When we come to the account of Jesus sharing a meal with Mary and Martha and Lazarus, something incredible is happening here that connects with the two themes above... Jesus came to Bethany to share a meal in the home of Lazarus, whom He had raised from the dead! This is a house that should have been filled with mourning and sorrow. Instead it is the centre of attention as a man who was dead and his saviour gather to eat. Can you imagine such a meal? A dinner after a funeral provides an opportunity for remembering the deceased and reconnecting ties that have been strained or broken. But what happens when the deceased is no longer dead? What do you talk about?

And then something incredible happens during this meal. Mary, Lazarus's sister, breaks open an expensive jar of perfume. Bethany means 'place of the poor.' In our Bible passage Jesus is anointed with really expensive perfume an action which might be considered totally unsuitable in a place of poor people! But Mary had much to be thankful to Jesus for, he had raised her dead brother Lazarus from his stinking tomb, how could she deny Jesus her best perfume?

We are told that it was Judas who spoke out, he challenged Mary and did so on the grounds of extravagance. But we can be sure that all of the others there that night must have wanted to say something, even if some of them felt legitimately embarrassed. We know from Matthew's Gospel that all of the disciples disliked the waste of perfume being used on Jesus! Matthew in his Gospel says 'When the disciples saw this, they were indignant. "Why this waste?" they asked.' (Matthew 26:8). In Mark's Gospel too he records that it was "some who were there" who protested. (Mark 14:4), not just Judas! Yes, we can criticise Judas, but none of the disciples would have approved and truthfully all of us would be appalled when we heard about this lewd behaviour and flagrant waste. Everybody except Jesus. Jesus defends Mary: "Leave her alone, " He says. "She is anointing me, making preparations for my death. "

Jesus knows how much Mary loves Him, and He recognises the goodness in her devotional act of extravagant love. She loved Jesus, and she poured out her love like priceless perfume, like there was no tomorrow, without ever counting the cost.

And here Jesus suggests that Mary's keeping the perfume in her possession and using it on Him now has a purpose more than she perhaps intended: announcing the nearness of Jesus' death and preparing for His burial. Whatever reason Mary had for anointing Jesus' feet, Jesus could see the deeper significance, and He announced this again to His disciples. The day of His death was drawing near. And soon there would be women seeking to embalm His dead body. There was already a 'weight' around them as Jesus

had spoken of His impending death. But Jesus is seeking us to look at death and dying in a different way.

All around Jesus and this meal, many are plotting Jesus' death. In the midst of the ugly schemes that are being plotted, Mary's anointing of Jesus offers a beautiful demonstration of love and devotion – but not only the love and devotion of Mary, but the love and devotion God has for us in Christ Jesus our Saviour.

The word which our Lord uses in this verse shows in what light this section is to be viewed. It is not so much the living Saviour that we have before us as the Saviour on whom sentence of death has been passed.

Not long after the anointing we hear Jesus say: *The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit (12:23-24). "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say--'Father, save Me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father glorify Your name."* (12:27-28). *Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son so that the Son may glorify You (17:1).*

If you have ever been with someone as they have passed from this life, it is not uncommon for people to seek physical contact with loved ones. They caress their foreheads, rub their hands and feet, and touch their skin. Touching someone as they prepare to die is a sign of compassion and connectedness even today. If we would rub someone's forehead and rub their hands and feet and touch their skin in other circumstances, such actions could be misinterpreted. But as someone is preparing to die, loving compassion motivates us to gently reach out and touch loved ones.

As Jesus dines with Mary and Martha and Lazarus, and His disciples and friends, Mary reaches out to Jesus. She touches Jesus in a way that confronts many people. But whatever way this may be read (and sometimes it is misread from current agendas and ideologies) Mary is at Jesus' feet with reverence and love. Her devotion to Him is so great that she'd do anything for Him. And when she's finished notice the little bit of detail that John throws in, in v3: "The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume." It's as though John's saying this act itself has filled the house with its fragrance. In the words of Phil 4, it's "a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God." And in the next chapter of John's Gospel we have the account of Jesus washing the disciples' feet. There Jesus turns the tables and Himself gets down on His hands and knees to serve them.

Are you aware of how much Jesus has done for you? Mary's story reminds us today that "God's love for the world was so extravagant that God came in human form – in Jesus of Nazareth – to be with us and to suffer for us. Just as Mary did not hold anything back – God holds nothing back in loving us.

This text has a special message for us in many ways. We all should be seeking to enjoy the company of the Saviour no matter the circumstances of life (and we have a wonderful gift in the life of the church in the holy meal of Holy Communion). We also know that we live in a world of pain and suffering and death. But in Christ Jesus, in time and creation, God has Himself walked this earth and entered that pain and suffering and death. And as we draw near the end of the Lenten season, we are reminded that God in Christ Jesus did not hold back His love for us. Just as Mary gave of the best of what she had, even more so Jesus gave the best of what He had to offer – His life. Out of his complete and total love for us, He gave up everything so that we could be His forever.

We are indeed at a most solemn time of year for us as Christians – as we prepare to remember Jesus' suffering and death for us. But we are able to do so with same devotion of Mary as we also know the incredible gift of life God gives us in the life of Jesus. This gift is yours by God's grace. What a wonderful love from God in Christ our Saviour! Amen.