

Bless the world with our thanks for God's grace to us.

Rev'd Peter Balabanski

Lent 5 C –John 12 1-8

Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy! ^{Ps 126.6}

Mary's gift of nard to Jesus is a wild extravagance. It's not given to Jesus for him to keep and use. It's squandered on his feet; neither he nor anyone else can ever use it again. It's given as though none of them is going to see another day.

Like her sister Martha, Mary senses who Jesus is. Martha had declared to Jesus privately that he was the Messiah/anointed one. ^(11.27) Mary says the very same thing publicly by anointing Jesus. But by doing it the way she does, she evokes the anointing that has to do with the dead. Mary senses why he's come to Jerusalem: it can only lead to his death. So she does what people do when a loved one might soon die. We do all we can to show how much they mean to us.

Mary of Bethany knows instinctively where Jesus is going, yet she doesn't try to stop him. Watering the wheat today, we do something very similar to what Mary does when she anoints Jesus for his burial. We could grind and eat the wheat we have, but instead, we choose to give it up, and trust that God will bless our choice with a wonderful harvest: a resurrection. God's abundance allows for death, but also, God's story tells us to look for resurrection to a wonderful new life.

Mary's gesture isn't just extravagant; it's prophetic. Firstly, it's a proclamation of who Jesus is – God's anointed one – the one God's people had sought for over a thousand

years. It's also a well-wishing; 'Godspeed the feet of the one embarking on this perilous journey.' And finally, it's a sign – the last in John's book of signs – before Jesus' providential entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

Why can't Judas be like Mary of Bethany? For that matter, why don't all Jesus's followers pour ourselves out like Mary did? Maybe like Judas, our spiritual senses are blocked, and we struggle to accept a God whose extravagance is so great that it blocks out even the terror of death – never mind our savings for tomorrow.

Poor Judas is cut off from Mary's sense of wonder – her sense of gratitude. He's trapped by a choice for fear in his world of mistrust – where you keep more fuel in your tank than you'll ever need – even to the point of pretending you're doing it for someone else. But wonder of wonders; Jesus came for just such people as Judas. Judas belongs in this story just as firmly as Mary of Bethany does.

Even though he's one of Jesus' disciples, somehow Judas can't see who Jesus *is* the way Mary and Martha can. Doubtless there are very good reasons for his mixed fear and zeal. But fear is no foundation to build on. The only foundation is Jesus' love for us; love we could never deserve. Our faith is our response to *that* love. That's what we see in Mary of Bethany today.

Mary's gesture may have been her thanks for Jesus raising her brother Lazarus – outrageous grace and an outrageous response. Mary of Bethany tells us that the fear and suffering and misery of this world are not the defining realities of being. It's so healing when we meet these reckless givers! They transform our world. The world needs more people to give confrontingly.

Our giving to the poor and needy, our prayers for the sick, for the sad and for the unloved; our care for those burdened with responsibilities they may have chosen, but which eat them

alive – our gifts and prayers and care are not inputs for which we expect outcomes. More like grains of wheat that we have learned God will bless if we give them up. We set prayers and kindnesses loose in the world as fragrances which gently, beautifully alert sufferers to the existence of a different reality?

Gifts and prayers and care make perfect sense when they are seen for what they really are; a response to the Jesus who has met us, who has called us, and who leads us in the Way of self-giving, joyful abundant extravagance. We are to bless the world with our thanks for God's grace to us. And we pray that through our thankfulness, a sense of that infectious extravagance might just reveal its source to all who need to know God's endless love. Amen