

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

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Lent 5 C: John 12 1-8 Phil 3 3-14

Children plant and water wheat – letting it die so it might rise again.

Story of Peter Kahrmanis's abundant barbeques and happy worms

We are buffeted around by the extremes in today's gospel. Mary of Bethany bowls us over with her extravagant gift; perfume worth a year's wages squandered in a moment. Then there's the portrayal of Judas – so miserable and bitter. And finally, there are Jesus's words about the poor always with us – words abused ever since.

John's gospel works at a number of levels. We get extremes, like today, and often words have multiple meanings too. I've said before that John's is a very sensory gospel – there's more tasting, smelling, touching, seeing and hearing in John than almost anywhere else in the Bible. But when John says 'see' or 'hear', we're just as likely to find that it's not just physical seeing and hearing that's intended, but spiritual insight and wisdom as well. What happens to people, and what they do in this Gospel is as much spiritual and inward as it is physical and obvious.

So Mary's gift of nard to Jesus – and by its perfume, her gift to everyone within cooee of him: it's as much a sign of something else as it's a very confronting extravagance. The manner of its giving is extraordinary. It's not given to Jesus for him to keep and use. It's squandered on his feet, so 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 did, Mary senses who Jesus is. She also senses the purpose of his coming into Jerusalem's hostile environment at a time when doing so can only lead to his death. Martha had declared to Jesus privately that he was the Messiah/anointed one. ^(11.27) Mary proclaims 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. She does what we do if we sense that a loved one might soon die. Before they die, we do all we can to show how deeply we love them; 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. The children watering the wheat today do something very similar to what Mary does when she anoints Jesus for his burial. They could try to keep the wheat to grind and eat, but they choose to give it up for dead, and trust that God will bless that choice for trust with a wonderful harvest: a resurrection. For the children, the wasted wheat – for Mary of Bethany the squandered nard are signs of hope for a new, life-giving abundance. They're signs that God's abundance allows for death, but also that 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 tomorrow's

grocery bill.

Poor Judas is cut off from Mary's sense of wonder – her sense of gratitude. He's trapped by a choice for fear in the miserable 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 the wrong foundation to build on. The only foundation is Jesus' love for us; we build our faith on that foundation, in response to that love. That's what we see in Mary of Bethany today.

Mary's gesture may have sprung from overwhelming gratitude for Jesus raising her brother Lazarus. If so, is it any more than we sometimes feel when we sense what a gift we have been given in our own lives; in our families and loved ones?

Outrageous grace calls out an extravagant response. We all need more Marys of Bethany to tell 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. Judas obviously needs more role-models to shake his defences down.

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 strange if we think of them as inputs for which we expect outcomes. Better that we see them as grains of wheat that God will have someone else harvest? Can we set these 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 has shown us 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 that infectious extravagance might just reveal the greater reality to all who need to know God's endless love. Amen