

John 12: 1-8 Mary anoints Jesus' feet.

CCO & StJN 07 April 2019.

Lord, open our minds and our hearts to your word today, and teach us how to be more like you. Amen.

This reading is just 8 verses, but they are packed full of drama and teaching. Because it is so dramatic, I thought we'd do something different this morning. It's OK, I'm not going to ask anyone to come out here and perform, but I'd like us to try and enact this episode in our imagination, looking at it from the point of view of the different characters involved. And while we are still in this rather intimate space, it's a good opportunity.

You will probably find it helpful just to close your eyes and allow yourself to envisage the scene, as I help us to look at each of the protagonists in turn. I'd like you to try and put yourself in their place. How would you feel? What thoughts would be going through your head? How would YOU react in their situation? And why would you react that way? What does it tell you about yourself and your relationship with Jesus?

So just try and forget about those around you for now, close your eyes and let your imagination lead you deeper into the scene.

We begin with Lazarus, clearly a good friend to Jesus, but interestingly not one of the twelve disciples. Lazarus knows that he owes his life to Jesus. He must be delighted to be able to open his home to Jesus, to welcome him in and offer his hospitality. Just to be in his presence. Imagine his heartfelt gratitude to Jesus, his wonder at what Jesus has done for him.

Do you recognise the new life that Jesus has given you? Do you delight just to spend time with him, to be in his presence? . . .

We don't hear about the disciples other than Judas, but imagine that you are one of these men, quietly enjoying a good meal in the company of true friends. Then in comes this woman Mary. What is she up to? She is handling Jesus' feet! That's a bit much in itself. But now look – she has untied her hair and is wiping his feet with it. For a respectable Jewish woman of this time to let down her hair, literally, in public, would be like a woman in our day at a polite dinner party hitching up a long skirt to the top of her thighs. Shocking. Outrageous behaviour. How might you feel, as one of the onlookers on this scene? How would you handle your embarrassment? What would you think of Mary? . . . As you smell the fragrance and realise what Mary has done, does your attitude change? Do you begin to understand? . . .

Now let's look at Martha, dear Martha, busy as ever. Always with an eye on what needs to be done, always dashing around to make sure that everyone is provided for. It is Martha who runs out to meet Jesus when she learns that he is approaching after the death of Lazarus. And it is Martha who declares her faith that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. It is Martha who sends word to Mary back at the house that Jesus has arrived. Martha is always involved, giving a lead. And very often, it seems, in the kitchen. And today there's quite a crowd to feed, for if Judas is there, it's likely that the other disciples were there too, so that's 13 of them for a start. And Martha is only too pleased to show her love by offering this hospitality. It's not a chore but a labour of love. Only she *is* working quite hard, whereas Mary . . . Well, where IS Mary? Let's just imagine Martha popping her head out of the kitchen to see what Mary is up to. Oh my goodness! Mary! What are you thinking of? How can you do such a thing? We'll never live this down! Don't you care what other people are going to think when they hear what you've done!

Poor Martha. She is practical and sensible and organised, and doubtless holds the family together. We all need the Marthas of this world. They are the ones who often keep the whole show on the road, quietly beaver away in the background. And it can be hard for them to sympathise with the apparently more airy-fairy types, who can lift our minds to new places of imagination and creativity. We are all different, and all called to use our gifts to serve God and to serve others. Are you a Martha? Men too can have these qualities of practical, down-to-earth common sense. Thank God for your gift, for your capabilities, and ask him now to make you gentle, patient and understanding towards those who have a different kind of gift, the ones you might lose patience with at times

Now Mary. Mary has insight. Perhaps she is aware of the enmity of the Jewish authorities, after all they had been threatening to get rid of Lazarus because his restoration to life had drawn so many people to Jesus. Mary realises the threat against Jesus, she can see that they will get him in the end. And she loves him so deeply. She just needs to show him how much she loves him while there is still time, while she has the opportunity. Sometimes, love gives us these impulses: do it now, while you can! Or it may be too late. How many of us live with the regret that we failed to show love to someone while we still could? . . .

Mary is so overwhelmed by this sense of foreboding and her own need to let Jesus know that he is loved even as the clouds gather round him; she won't anoint his head – she is too humble to think of that. But his feet. As Jesus reclines at the table, she can just approach his feet from behind and offer the very best that she has. It is an extravagant outpouring of love, of gratitude, of surrender of herself. Nothing is held back. She has no care for what others might think of her actions – what do they matter right now, in this moment, when she can give this most precious gift to her Lord, and in so doing prove that all that she has, and all that she is, are at his

service? Touching, intimate, shocking, powerful. So powerful that it has been recorded for all time, and this demonstration of her devotion fills and permeates our Christian story just as the perfume from the ointment filled the whole house.

Imagine for a while that you are Mary. Do you feel that overwhelming love for Jesus that was so much more important than anything else? If you do, thank him, and imagine yourself doing as Mary did. If you don't, just ask him to make himself known to you in such a way that you too will come to love him as Mary did . . .

And then there's Judas. It's so easy to condemn Judas. But is that really fair? Imagine Judas from a strict Jewish background, and suddenly here's this woman, behaving quite outrageously and wasting all that expensive ointment on a pair of feet! Perhaps he blurts out to cover his acute embarrassment at what's going on, and the fact that Jesus doesn't seem to mind, doesn't do anything about it! What *is* going on?

Of course, he's right about the poor and their needs. This extravagance seems quite out of place when Jesus has been teaching them constantly about the need to care for the poor. As treasurer to their little group, Judas has been responsible for making sure that they contributed to aid for the poor in their community. But is that what *really* troubles him? Is it his concern for the needy? Or is it rather that he feels awkward when confronted with Mary's generosity? That seems rather more likely. Someone else's bold generosity can make us feel rather mean, slightly guilty. Something inside tells us that we *ought* to be able to be generous like that, but, actually, we can find all sorts of good reasons why we should hang on to what is ours. It's sensible, it's prudent, it's cautious. We might even say it is responsible, whereas what Mary has done is downright irresponsible, whichever way you look at it, isn't it?

It all depends on how we see things, and the way we see things is determined by what is inside us. Judas has witnessed an act of surpassing loveliness and dismissed it as extravagant waste. We see what we want to see. If we like a person, that person can do little wrong. If we dislike them, we may misinterpret the finest action. A warped mind brings a warped view of things; and if we find ourselves becoming very critical of others and imputing unworthy motives to them, we should, for a moment, stop examining them, and start examining ourselves. Let's just think about that for a moment. . . .

And finally, Jesus. It occurred to me as I pondered on this passage that perhaps Mary's act of love and service here might even have prompted Jesus' own act of love and service at the Last Supper, when he washed his disciples' feet. Maybe Mary had been his inspiration. Maybe he was so touched by what she did, by her symbolic self-offering while there was still time, that Jesus wanted to help his disciples understand the depth of *his* love, his self-giving to them, while he was still among them.

Try and imagine now that you are Jesus, receiving this tenderness and devotion. How does it make you feel? Do you feel a bit uncomfortable to begin with? Then humbled to receive such a sign of love? . . . Then does something in your heart cry out with joy that someone, someone finally has understood? Mary has got it! Mary knows who he really is and she knows what is coming and she is showing her solidarity, her faith in him, as well as her desolation that he is to be parted from them. Such comfort. Such encouragement. She is not to be criticised, no, she is to be held up as an example: it is not just her most precious material possession that she has given, but she has surrendered her ego to her Lord, her pride, her respectability, her all.

You might like quietly to read through the words of our hymn on the sheet, All to Jesus I surrender, and make it your own prayer. Amen.