



Rev Helen Jacobi

Perfume

Year C Lent 5

Isaiah 43:16-21

John 12:1-8

3 April 2022

Mary took a pound of costly perfume, made of pure nard -

It would have been in a jar or a flask of some kind. Nard or spike nard was from a plant grown in the Himalayas and was used for its strong perfume in the ancient world.

In the Song of Songs we hear a love poem describing a bride:

Your plants are an orchard of pomegranates with choice fruits, with henna and nard, nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with every kind of incense tree, with myrrh and aloes and all the finest spices.¹

As Mary removed the lid from the jar the aroma would have filled the room; people would have recognised the perfume. What was she about to do?

As usual Martha had prepared the meal while Mary was floating about, listening to the discussions of the men. Lazarus her brother was there this time; last time Jesus visited the house at Bethany Lazarus had died; or so they thought. John tells us it is 6 days before the Passover. Religious politics crackling in the air. The Passover when the people of Israel remember how they were freed from Egypt and the angel of death passed over their houses and let them live. The Passover was a celebration of freedom; but they celebrated now in a city full of Roman soldiers, and Pilate and his troops were on their way to be sure the Jews didn't get out of hand.

Mary and Martha's house was in Bethany, only a day's walk from Jerusalem, down the valley and up the other side. Bethany looks over Jerusalem, from there you could watch the walking pilgrims beginning to stream into the city. In the midst of all this, Mary opens up her jar of perfume. So what is she doing? They want to sit down for dinner. She approaches Jesus – will she anoint him as

¹ Song of Songs 4:13-14

king? Kings were always anointed with oil on their heads. This kind of perfume exactly. Will she anoint him king and call for the people to rise up?²

This story, or a similar one is also recounted in Mark and Matthew, but located at the house of Simon the leper, and an unnamed woman pours the perfume on Jesus' head.³ The biblical scholars debate whether these were two different events, or whether the accounts are based in the same event, with some of the details changed in the telling.

Here Mary could have anointed Jesus' head. But she kneels at his feet, and massages the perfume, the oil, into his feet. There is a sharp intake of breath from all around. What is she doing?

She takes her time, massaging his feet. And then worse, she lets down her hair; her hair which must be pinned up and covered at all times; she lets it loose and wipes Jesus' feet with her hair, and I think her tears. Embarrassed, no one knows where to look!

Maybe they are thinking of other verses from the Song of Songs:

While the king was at his table, my perfume spread its fragrance.

My beloved is to me a sachet of myrrh resting between my breasts.

*My beloved is to me a cluster of henna blossoms from the vineyards of En Gedi.*⁴

Jesus encourages the women who follow him to take their place with the men but this is too much. This is personal, intimate, and shocking!

Judas is the first to speak, to break the awkward silence – *why was this perfume not sold and the money given to the poor?*

Then we wouldn't have to witness this unseemly act. Then we wouldn't be being embarrassed like this – sell the perfume and give the money to the poor – that is what we are all about isn't it? Says poor Judas who is on his way to collect his 30 pieces of silver for betraying Jesus. He still doesn't want to criticise Jesus for allowing this woman to approach him like this – so let's criticise her for her wasteful spending.

But Jesus knows. Jesus knows what Mary is doing.

Leave her alone, she is preparing me for my burial.

Another sharp intake of breath. What?

Jesus, in reply to Judas, quotes the book of Deuteronomy:

*Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land.'*⁵

² Barbara Brown Taylor "The Prophet Mary" http://day1.org/1760-the_prophet_mary

³ Mt 26; Mk 14

⁴ Song of Songs 1:12-14

⁵ Deuteronomy 15:11

You can always assist those in need but today Mary is helping me; preparing me; doing something she will not be able to do later:
touch me, massage me, anoint me. Yes it is extravagant, excessive - like God's love, like my love.

Barbara Brown Taylor says: "This bottle will not be held back to be kept and admired. This precious substance will not be saved. It will be opened, offered and used, at great price. It will be raised up and poured out for the life of the world, emptied to the last drop."⁶

The gospel writer John layers this story with images which point us to death and resurrection, anointing and burial; we are supposed to get all the connections to the Passover, the politics; to Lazarus;
but there is still the personal moment of realisation that their friend and teacher will not always be there. And as usual it is one of the women who intuitively knows that. It is Mary, who having seen her brother raised from the dead, understands that Jesus too must pass this way.

In Mark and Matthew's versions of this account they conclude with Jesus saying of the unnamed woman "truly I tell you wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."⁷

Mary is a prophet this day echoing the prophets who have gone before
*I am about to do a new thing says the Lord, I will give water in the wilderness and rivers in the desert, so that my people might declare my praise.*⁸

A new thing, a sad thing, a beautiful thing.

A generous outpouring, of life giving love.

And the house was filled with the fragrance of perfume.

In our church tradition we carry forward this practice of anointing with oil.

Anointing at baptism; anointing at death; and anointing for healing.

Every year on Maundy Thursday the clergy of the diocese gather with the bishop to renew our ordination vows and during the eucharist, oils are blessed which are then distributed to all of us to use during the year. The oil for anointing for healing, has a fragrance added to it. The scent lingers in the air as we pray for someone.

Our NZ Prayer Book (pp738 ff) has a beautiful liturgy for healing:

⁶ Barbara Brown Taylor "The Prophet Mary" http://day1.org/1760-the_prophet_mary

⁷ Mt 26:13; Mk 14:9

⁸ Isaiah 43:19-21

Like the first disciples
before the coming of God's power at Pentecost,
we wait in faith, and pray.

**Be with us, Holy Spirit;
nothing can separate us from your love.**

**Be with us as of old,
fill us with your power,
direct all our thoughts to your goodness.**

**Be present, Holy Spirit;
bring faith and healing and peace.**

N, I anoint you with this holy oil.

Receive Christ's forgiveness and healing.

The power of the Saviour who suffered for you

flow through your mind and body,

lifting you to peace and inward strength.

Amen.

God our healer,

keep us aware of your presence,

support us with your power,

comfort us with your protection,

give us strength

and establish us in your peace.

When we have the privilege to pray this liturgy with someone I always think of
Mary anointing Jesus.

When words run out as they often do in the face of suffering, when there is
nothing to be said, the oil, the fragrance, the touch, bring the abundance of God's
love.

We might not get to see the miracles of Jesus' time but we can receive the
miracle of peace, or calm, or hope, or strength.

There are many steps on the journey of healing – we have seen this Lent a thread
woven through seemingly unrelated readings: seeing things as they are;
lamenting; repenting; returning home; and now anointing with prayer and touch.
All these actions are part of healing – there are many more I am sure – but these
are the ones that have appeared to us this season.

These actions apply to us as individuals, as whanau, as communities, as a global
community. Today we have seen the personal and the intimate:

*Mary took a pound of costly perfume, made of pure nard ...And the house was
filled with the fragrance of perfume.*