

7 April 2019

Isaiah 43.16-21

John 12.1-8

A moment of extravagance

This morning we are going to reflect on this story of Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet.

I am going to use this cartoon drawn by Martin Young to help us to reflect on this scene.

Now because it is a cartoon it probably fails to capture some of the raw emotion of this scene.

There are many other images that I could have used to have portrayed the raw emotion of Mary's gesture ...

But I want to use this one because it captures all of the characters in this story.

And I want to ask the question about where we would have been in this story? Where would you have been?

Which of the characters do you identify with most?

Let's begin with Martha, Mary and Lazarus – these three brother and sisters.

Remember again the background to this story: Mary and Martha are sisters. Their brother Lazarus had died. They knew Jesus and had asked him to come when Lazarus was taken ill. But Jesus only arrived after Lazarus had been dead for two days.

They berate Jesus for not being there for them. But then Jesus goes to the tomb and raises Lazarus from the dead.

And this meal is put on to honour Jesus, and to celebrate Lazarus being restored to life.

Lazarus comes to this meal having been through the roller-coaster of illness, death, burial and resurrection.

Martha and Mary come to this meal having been through the roller-coaster of anxiety, loss, grief, anger, amazement and sheer joy.

All of them come to this meal with the same story behind them ... but around this table they each act in quite different ways.

Now, I think that each of them are simply being themselves. They are celebrating all that has happened, and they are honouring Jesus in the best way that they know how. Each of them responds to what has happened in a way that is appropriate for them.

Lazarus is reclining at the table. He is enjoying the party! Presumably, he has that 'great to be alive' feeling – and no doubt enjoying the fact that he is in company with Jesus and has the opportunity to spend some time with him. I imagine a scene of conversation and laughter. But perhaps also taking the opportunity to talk to Jesus about what all this now means for him.

Martha responds to this by doing what Martha does. She is the carer, the feeder, the one who gets on with things and makes sure that things happen. She is filling up cups, replenishing plates, clearing away the mess ... and probably enjoying the hum of it all and loving to see people enjoying the food and the wine. This is her way of showing love and appreciation. She is hostess. She is welcomer. She's the one who puts people at ease by making sure that they feel at home and looked after.

And then there is Mary.

None of that is quite enough for Mary. It doesn't seem to capture the magnitude of everything that has happened.

It's not enough just to be with Jesus and soak up his company ... at least not on this occasion.

And she needs to do more than prepare food and serve wine.

She's a different character. She needs to express her love differently. And how differently!

Jesus has done something extravagant for her and her family. She now needs to respond with something dramatic and extravagant for him.

She remembers the store of nard she has. She had recently had to use it to anoint her brother's body for burial – now that *had* turned out to be a needless waste!

What better way to express her love to Jesus than to use this precious, precious perfume to anoint Jesus' feet.

And emotion clearly got the better of her. It wasn't enough to pour the perfume over his feet, she then wiped his feet with her own hair. Personal ... intimate even ... but an outpouring of thankful love.

Three different people, grateful for the new thing that Jesus had done in their lives, but each around this meal table, expressing their love and gratitude in quite different ways.

And I wonder where we would have been?

Let me make myself clear here. I think each of these characters represents a perfectly appropriate way of responding. This story isn't about raising one person above the others.

Jesus' affirmation of Mary isn't about Jesus saying that this is what everyone should have been doing. It is about affirming what Mary has done when others wanted to dismiss her.

As I listen to this story, I don't think that Jesus is making any kind of negative judgment on any of them. By welcoming the love expressed by Mary, I don't think that he is in any way suggesting that Lazarus and Martha should have done anything other than what they did.

But as Mary's gesture is called into question, he simply wants to affirm what she has done as an expression of love.

Now my guess is that many of us here would probably more easily identify with either Lazarus or with Martha.

With Lazarus, we might want to be in with the conversation, the thinking, the talking, the exchange of ideas.

I want to suggest that Lazarus is the kind of person who enjoys words –

- either in the buzz of conversation in company with friends
- or the thinking and talking through of ideas, the swapping of opinions

And I suspect that many of us would identify with Lazarus. That's where we would have been. Some of us more vocally than others. But our world is full of words, thoughts and ideas ... and that's where we are most comfortable.

Or with Martha, we might have been much more comfortable just getting on and doing things. Actions are our medium for showing appreciation – for connecting with others – for expressing ourselves.

- making sure that things get done,
- caring for people,
- looking after the practicalities.

Many of us would be there with Martha – serving the food and the wine. And we would have loved it. We would have been fulfilled in doing that.

But for some neither words nor actions are quite enough. These are the people who live in the world of emotions, of beauty, of gestures

- The artists
- The dreamers
- the people who need to show and express their emotions;

The Mary's among us. And not all Mary's would have done the very public act that this Mary did – but neither words nor actions would have satisfied them.

They might have written a poem, or sung a song or painted a picture.

But this story also tells us that these are the people who are often side-lined, or misunderstood ... because those who value words or actions don't get them, or don't understand them.

Which means that many who identify with Mary will also identify with her feeling of being dismissed.

And that thought then takes us to the other characters in this scene and what they make of it.

Firstly, of course, we have Judas.

Now I think it might be helpful to put to one side the fact that it is Judas in this story who reacts with outrage at the waste of money that this gesture represents, because I suspect that Judas was expressing something that others in the room were thinking. I don't think that the fact that he was the one who was going to betray Jesus, nor that he had his fingers in the disciples' common purse should allow us to wriggle out of recognising ourselves in his comments. It is good to remind ourselves that in Mark's rather different version of this story it is the onlookers in general who ask this question.

If we are honest with ourselves, I suspect that this thought would have gone through many of our minds, had we been there.

What a waste of money? Think what could have been done with it?

Judas' response is the self-righteous, knee-jerk response of outrage to anything that we don't really understand ... and particularly to people who act in very different ways to the ways that we act.

Had this happened in today's world, Judas would have had his smart phone out. He would have taken a picture or video of Mary in the act. He would have tried to make sure that that photograph was as incriminating as it could be. And he would have been sharing that photograph on twitter and Instagram with the hash tag #whatawaste!!!

It is said that we live in a world of 'outrage', because of the way in which social media has enabled people to share with millions their sense of being offended by something they don't understand.

And that's exactly what's happening here.

Mary is so different to Judas. Judas just doesn't get her at all.

She expresses her love in this extravagant and apparently wasteful way.

Judas is a man of action. He gets things done. He probably knows all about impatience and anger ... but not about this touchy, feely, smelly stuff that is going on in front of him. 'How does this change the world?'

But because he doesn't understand her – because what she does would have been anathema to him – he assumes it must be wrong.

And so he justifies his angry response, his sense of offence, with what he believes is sound moral argument - "The money could have been given to the poor!"

This is classic outrage.

You have a very immediate, gut response to something that is different and that you don't understand.

You take offence – and you then justify the way you have reacted with an unchallengeable, moral argument.

He didn't take the time to ask why he was reacting in that way. Why this gut response?

He didn't take the time to put himself in Mary's shoes, to understand who she was or what she had been through.

He didn't take the time to allow this moment to play itself out, to allow Jesus to respond to this gesture.

In Martin Young's cartoon, he has included a number of the disciples of Jesus around the table, and I love the way that he has given them very different responses to what is going on.

Two of the disciples are kind of letting it all pass them by, because they are caught up in the drinking and the eating.

- They are caught up in themselves.
- Too busy with themselves and their moment to see what is going on in someone else's life.

Two of them are clearly puzzled, - but not responding with the same immediate outrage of Judas. They cannot make it out.

And two of them are taking it all in – and have clearly responded warmly to Mary's gesture.

And again, I wonder which camp we would have been in?

I suspect that I would have been with those with the puzzled faces.

I just don't do grand emotional gesture! And I think I would have felt quite awkward and embarrassed by the outward emotion of it all.

I hope I wouldn't, but I might even have felt affronted by it.

After all what Mary did was very public. It was very intrusive ... not least because the perfume would have stunk the place out! You couldn't ignore it.

And the whole thing was enormously sensual and tactile – the kind of thing that if you see it, you can't take your eyes off it ... and yet you feel as if you are intruding on something that is very personal and intimate.

And so I have to ask myself, what of the Mary's today?

Where do we give space for the Mary's in the life of the church.

We give plenty of space for those who like words – either for those who like to talk, or those who like to listen. We are pretty good with words in the church. Our services are full of words. After the service we like to have a good old natter with each other.

We give space for those who like to 'do' – we often complain that we don't have enough volunteers to do things. But for those who like doing, there are opportunities to express themselves in the life of the church.

But what about the Mary's – those who express themselves through emotion, through art – in extravagant gesture or in artistic expression.

Where is the space for them in the church? And how would they be received and given space.

But another question as well –

What about the Mary in each one of us?

Many of us are actually a mix of all of these things ... and at different moments and different times we might need to be any of these.

While much of the time we identify with Lazarus, or Martha ... there may be moments in our lives when the Mary needs to come out.

For all we know, Judas' outrage at Mary may have been triggered because she touched in him a deep chord ... a need deep within himself which he suppressed. A refusal to connect with his emotions.

What if I need to affirm the Mary within me?

We like to keep things predictable ... We like to keep things measured.

"Everything in moderation."

But this isn't moderation, because God doesn't do things in moderation.

- He is the one who raises Lazarus
- He is the God who can't be bound into the box of the past – he is the God who does new things
- He is the God who makes the extravagant gesture of giving his Son to die on the cross
- He is the God who raises Jesus from the dead and pours his Spirit into our hearts

This is not the God of moderation, but the God of extravagant love ... not just for a moment, but always.