

What words would you use to sum up the gospel reading we've just heard. - what about words like Extravagance. Pleasure. Effusiveness. Exuberance - passion? These aren't ideas that we usually associate with Lent and the overture to Jesus' passion.

What can we discover about this encounter between Jesus, Judas, and this woman we know as Mary of Bethany.

Mary's gift, along with Judas's stinginess, has greater significance because of how it participates in a series of developments.

- Passover is near, and so too is Jesus' "hour" (see 13:1). He spends time with his friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus soon after the pivotal scene of Lazarus being raised from the dead (11:1-44). That is the "sign" that brings many to believe in him (11:45; 12:9-11), many to flock to him (12:17-19), and others to plot his death (11:47-53). When Jesus mentions his burial in 12:7, this confirms that his end is coming. Yet Lazarus's presence at the table confirms that death does not speak the final word.
- Jesus makes the connection between the anointing and his burial in 12:7, a verse that has proved challenging to render into sensible English. Who had Mary bought this perfume for - was it for her brother Lazarus? He no longer needed it - or not yet! Rather, Jesus suggests that Mary's keeping the perfume in her possession and using it on him now have consequently achieved a greater, more meaningful purpose that she perhaps intended: announcing the nearness of Jesus' death and preparing for his burial.
- The sweet smell of Mary's perfume counters the stench of Lazarus's tomb (11:39). Life and death, wholeness and corruption remain contrasted throughout both scenes. As punctuated by the anointing for burial, Jesus looks toward his death, contrasting his impending departure with the perennial opportunity to serve the poor. The specter of Jesus' death makes a deed like Mary's strangely appropriate, because it emanates from love and expresses understanding about Jesus and what he must do. This is like our lives, and the contrasts that so often face us.
- Mary exceeds good taste. Bible commentators cannot agree about whether the detail concerning Mary's hair lends an erotic air to the event, although I think it is impossible to hear the story today without raising an eyebrow. It certainly would have done then. The same disciples were present when Jesus met the Samaritan woman in chapter 4; and they wondered then why he was even just talking to a woman. At the very least, Mary's hair imbues the act with profound intimacy, calling attention to the tactile element of the anointing. If the fragrance of her perfume fills the house, the gentle touch of her locks fills Jesus' sensations. It is an expression of deep love that those watching would hardly ignore or find ordinary.

Mary's wiping of Jesus' feet prefigures the time when he will wipe the feet of his disciples (13:5). This reveals her as a model disciple, for the washing and wiping of feet expresses a unity with Jesus (13:8) and reflects his command (13:14-15). We know from 6:70-71 that Judas is "a devil," but John chooses this point in the narrative to reveal him as a thief (compare 13:29). This creates a clear opposition between him and Mary. He is false; she is true. He is greedy and self-serving; she is generous and ebullient in devotion. He is offended. Does he regret losing the chance to pilfer from the 300 denarii, or is Mary's lavish love too disturbing to watch? What do we make of other's devotion to the Lord - are we challenged by it? We can understand the economic and charitable logic beneath Judas's criticism, but we should also recognize that it resembles a rigorous, unyielding piety - religion in name

only - that cannot stomach a wild love like Mary's. Acts of true grace and love regularly get slandered as deviance.

As we begin passiontide, looking towards Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday Good Friday and then Easter Day, I wonder if I could invite you to read through John's gospel and his account of the last week of Jesus life on earth, but through this event we've been thinking about today. Ask yourself the question - where am I in this story? as you read. Today's gospel, for instance, causes us to ask that question - am I like the disciples - confused about what is to come - like Judas- religious, yet suspicious of those who have a devoted faith? Or like Mary of Bethany - exuberant in my worship, devoted in love for a Lord who would die for me, and whose new life I witness will mean he is with me for ever.

(anointing - end of service?)