The Holy Gospel, according to John 12: 1-8

1Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. **2**There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. **3**Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+12&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-26573a)] with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. **4**But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, **5**“Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denari] and the money given to the poor?” **6**(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) **7**Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. **8**You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

This is the gospel of Christ

Pleas be seated.

The story begins with the chronological note that this episode occurred six days before the Passover. In the preceding scene of John chapter 11, people are speculating as to whether Jesus will dare to go to Jerusalem for the festival. The word was out. Rumour had it that there was dark talk that the officials had arranged for the arrest of Jesus if he came for the Passover.

The story connects this episode with the resurrection of Lazarus, as this Mary is not the mother of Jesus, this is the Mary of Bethany, who has seen Jesus raise her brother Lazarus from the dead.

The graditude of Mary for the restoration of her brother’s life can be gauged by the extravagance of her act: she took a pound of costly perfume, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair. Even before Judas’ calculating remark about the value of this perfume, first-century readers would know that this large quantity of high-quality perfume was remarkably valuable, that its fragrance filled the entire house, and further affirms its costliness and the luxuriousness of Mary’s act.

Her outpouring of this elaborate gift is undoubtedly an act of thanksgiving for the gift of life, although the reader is never given any insight into Mary’s internal thoughts.

What first-century readers would find extremely odd in this story is that Mary anoints the feet of Jesus rather than his head, as is the case narrated in Mark and Matthew. She then wiped his feet with her hair, which results in the dissipation of the costly perfume she has just poured onto his feet. There is a possible explanation for this gesture that seems plausible. Firstly, in John 13 Jesus washes the feet of his disciples, dries them and then instructs them that they do the same for each other. Mary’s act of anointing the feet of Jesus, and then wiping them with her hair may anticipate symbolically this act of service.

Although Judas is already known to the reader as a “devil,” he was one of the twelve, and sadly, the one who would betray Jesus. Judas was a contradictory character: he was one of Jesus disciples, and he was about to betray him. Unlike the sisters’ intentions, Judas’s secret motivations are made known to the reader. His concern for the poor is merely a ruse to cover his own greed. Eventually, Jesus is handed over not by an enemy or stranger but by one of his intimate associates. Apparently, true loyalty and honesty were not prerequisites for discipleship of this first group of followers.

The story not only named Judas as the sole critic of Mary, it identified him as a thief who steals from the common purse of which he had charge. Consequently, Judas’ response addresses the money rather than the part anointed and the question about the value seems to reflect a straightforward concern about priorities. In a rather sinister way, John argued that, had the perfume been sold, Judas was the one who stood to benefit from the money thus acquired. What may have originated as a noble intention in Judas had now been corrupted by self-interest, where the funds to help the poor also served to help personal needs of Judas. We might imagine him justifying this support for the poor on the grounds that he was the disciple most concerned with the poor. However, in the end his discipleship degenerated from self-interest into active opposition to Jesus which led to Judas trading information about Jesus’ whereabouts for thirty pieces of silver. Historically, this action left an indelible stain on the name Judas, and nowadays, to be called a Judas is an insult. Quite often, when a name stains the pages of history, it generally falls into disuse. Similarly, it is unlikely that anyone in recent history would name a child Adolf. Coming a little further forward, if my surname was Putin, I’d be straight down to the Registry Office to change it!

Jesus’ response came on two fronts: first a defence of the action of Mary, and secondly, a rebuttal to Judas’ feigned concern for the poor. The idea that Mary bought the perfume for the burial seems a little unclear, because had Mary bought the perfume for such a purpose, she would not have used it here. Perhaps Jesus referred to the unanticipated function of Mary’s action, in that he knew the day of burial was now quite close, and Mary’s action had foreshadowed the anointing needed then.

What is quite interesting is the statement, “you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me”. I think this was not a statement about the social attitudes that ought to govern the church’s behaviour, but rather a contrast of the permanent presence of the poor with the impending absence of Jesus. It could be a forceful reminder that Jesus will only be present for a brief time.

The irony within this passage is striking. Judas seems to speak for the poor, well, at least on the surface, reflecting his apparent prophetic concern for the outcast and the marginalised, and Mary, by contrast, appears to act in a frivolous, wasteful act that only benefits Jesus.

We know that worship serves as the focal point in Christian life, just as Mary shows in this passage. Mary poured out precious perfume and the gift of herself in the ritual of washing of Jesus’ feet. The intimate act of worship occurred at the home of Lazarus, whom Jesus called back to life. Consequently, it is Mary who becomes the true host of this event, sharing an abundance of love, right from the heart. Love that flows from the heart often appears in unexpected forms, and here Mary has been touched and inwardly transformed in a special relationship with Jesus. Her unprompted generosity showed her gratefulness for the demonstration of God’s presence in and around her.

So, we have reached a turning point. At the halfway point through lent John begins to tell the story of Jesus’ final week. The passage begins the countdown to the final days before the crucifixion and glorification of Jesus. The raising of Lazarus has steeled everyone’s resolve, the die is cast, and there will be no more discussions. In these last six days to come, all the major players in the story have set themselves on a course that will end up for many at the foot of the cross, and for others, at the empty tomb.

I don’t want to spoil the story, so watch this space.

Amen