



Extravagant devotion

Lent 5 John 12:1 – 8

Something happened. Jesus was reclining at meal in a house and a woman entered and anointed him. And, despite the objections of the other meal guests, Jesus accepted and endorsed the devotion of the act. Something happened and this story gained a life within the early church such that all four Gospels give us a version of the story. The details of the story vary between the Gospels; the name of the woman, the house, the anointing, the complaint, and when in Jesus life. However, the heart of the story – the power, necessity and audacity of worship – remains. Besides the baptism and the crucifixion, this is the one common story of something done to or for Jesus, and not by Jesus. And that tells us that this story was considered valuable and important, a story worth telling and preserving in the early church communities. The communities that gave us the Gospels shaped the story in different ways, but the message at the heart of the story was important – this Jesus that we are talking about and trying to follow is not just a teacher, or a prophet, or even a miracle worker, he is worthy of costly devotion and worship.

The church communities that produced the Gospels were still coming to grips with what it meant to be Christians. We've been the uniting Church for 40 years and are still working out what it means to be in union. The early church wasn't much older, and they were losing their founders and figuring out what was important to hold on to. The book of Acts describes the first church community and the struggle they went through to work out what it meant to live in this new relationship with God in and through Jesus. After the wonderful rush of Pentecost, the community settled down to be a sort of commune with free sharing of resources. And the first problem to arise was the tension over the practical issues of food distribution versus the religious issues of worship and teaching. It was about the workload of the Apostles, and solved with the appointment of deacons, but it speaks to this issue of the balance between practical lived faith and the religious life; between charity and worship. And the preservation of this story of a woman anointing Jesus says that this issue was alive in all the early church communities. The joy of this new kingdom of God announced by Jesus, a kingdom of justice for the poor and the marginalised, a kingdom inaugurated in community, would have had expectations of the necessities of life threatening to swamp the idea that they were a community of faith. And in that possibly tense argument over identity and purpose and resources, they held this story of the woman with a jar of expensive ointment who anoints Jesus.

In today's account from John it is Judas who protests over the extravagance of the nard. Some of you will be going through the Lenten Study and will have looked at this story and the question of what the story would look like without the derogatory comments about Judas. It would look like the story in Matthew and Mark! In those accounts, it is unnamed people, or the disciples, who raise the question about the waste of expensive ointment. It doesn't take a thieving betrayer to question the priorities and resources of the church! Relieving Judas of the 'bad guy' image in this story makes the issue more relatable. We have all, at some time, questioned the priorities of spending in the church, and usually in this dichotomy – why spend money on that religious piety when it could go to practical mission?

Why build over size, gaudy churches in the face of poverty and need?

Why serve communion with gold or silver plates and goblets when those sharing can't even afford food?

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Why spend money on refurbishing an old organ when there are refugees to support?

But Jesus answer to the complaint isn't in the terms of that dichotomy. He doesn't say, "The poor can look after themselves, come worship me". In the context of the original story, the human Jesus is looking towards his death and saying, "This moment of devotion is a fleeting opportunity for heart felt devotion, she did well to take it". In the life of the early church, the story was saying, "The life of discipleship is hard and filled with the demands of those in need, worship is a rare and valuable time". And preserved in the Gospels, the story reminds successive generations, "We are not just a charity or mission group following a guru of love, we are a community of faith that needs to attend to devotion and worship to gain the inner strength to show love to those in need. And that devotion and worship is for Jesus, the crucified, Risen One who shows us God".

When Luke tells this story, it is at a much earlier point in Jesus ministry, and it is about gratitude for forgiveness and not anointing for Jesus death. However, where we are in the journey through Lent, entering the shadow of the cross, the two messages join together. Given all that God has done for us in and through Jesus, shouldn't we be extravagant in our devotion and worship? Yes, service to those in need can be worship, but the heart of our faith is that we are people of faith. We are called to mission and service, but also called to gather in worship, to recognise that the mission and service is on the name and strength of the God who sent Jesus to be our reconciliation.

Something happened. Jesus was reclining at meal in a house and a woman entered and anointed him. And, despite the objections of the other meal guests, Jesus accepted and endorsed the devotion of the act. And whether that was Mary, the sister of Martha, or an unnamed woman, or a forgiven sinner, and whether she anointed Jesus head or his feet, the early communities of Jesus Christ treasured this story as a reminder of their first call of devotion and worship. A story to remind us to treasure the moments of devotion in the midst of our lives as disciples and followers of Jesus, the One walking to the cross.

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