



**Sermon:-13<sup>th</sup> March 2016**

## **Wasting time with God**

Last week we looked at the prodigal son, and considered that in fact the love that God holds for us could be called prodigal. It is outrageous, extravagant, costly. Today we look at another act of outrageous, costly love as Mary shows her love for Jesus with a generosity that I think we can scarcely imagine.

I'd like you to picture the scene. The guests are gathered around the table, the honoured guest at the head. The room buzzes with conversation as they question Jesus. This is a rare opportunity to spend time with him and a few others. No crowds bustling around, trying to get close to him, just a few select dinner guests, including Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead. There are noises from the street outside, dogs barking, children shouting, mothers calling to them. Street traders are vending their wares, but the noises are distant, not intrusive. The room is hot and smells of spicy food, and warm bodies. The men gathered around the table are eating and drinking even as they are conversing, feasting on the splendid meal before them. Martha serves them, as befits the place of a woman in this culture. She would eat later, after the men had eaten.

Do you remember when Jesus visited Mary and Martha before? Martha was doing all the work while Mary sat at the feet of Jesus to listen to him talk. Martha was annoyed with Mary for her apparent laziness but also with Jesus for allowing it. And this is a very similar scene. Martha doing all the work, and Mary, well, where is Mary?

There is a break in the conversation. A door has opened and a breath of air wafts into the room, slightly cooler as it moves around their ankles. Here is Mary! But what is she carrying? It is not a dish of food, nor even a flagon of wine.

It looks like a flask of perfume. In the sudden shocked silence she kneels in front of Jesus. How dare she interrupt! This is not her place! She should be serving, helping Martha. Mary seems completely unaware of the tension in the room. The atmosphere is thick with it but she kneels before Jesus, oblivious to everyone else. There is a loud

snap in the silence as she breaks the seal of the perfume bottle. The scent drifts into the air, masking odours of food, and other less savoury smells. The fragrance is rich and sweet. It is an expensive perfume.

She pours the expensive ointment over his feet. She spares not a drop. It splashes over his feet to fall on the ground and waste itself in the earth.

Then she looses her hair, and now there is outrage in the room. It is a scandal for a woman to unbind her hair in the company of men. Now the silence is broken by the murmurs of the guests, angry murmurs. Especially Judas who is indignant 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' He thinks he is being clever. He knows that Jesus has argued on behalf of the poor. He knows that Jesus is scathing of those who waste their resources instead of doing good with them. In this case, however, he is mistaken. Jesus once again defends Mary against her critic, then Martha, now Judas: 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'

I wonder if Mary realized the significance of what she did or understood that Jesus was going to his death? She was taking an opportunity to show her love and gratitude to Jesus, who was her advocate against her critics, who gave her back her brother from the grave and who treated her as an equal of any of his male disciples. She broke the vial of perfume and poured its entire contents over Jesus' feet. A denarius was equivalent to the daily wage for a labourer so in today's value, Mary's anointing is the equivalent of a year's wages, maybe about £25,000. Mary was extravagant in her adoration because in her eyes, Jesus was worth it ... far more valuable than 300 denarii.

Mary acted out of love and gratitude. She acted instinctively, but in ways that she could not have known, her action was prophetic, and in more ways than one. Her anointing of Jesus' feet foreshadowed the anointing of his body for burial. In fact, his body was never to be anointed, as he had already risen when the women went to the tomb to perform this rite. This was the only anointing he would have, this was her chance and

she took it. Her costly sacrifice echoed in a small way his costlier one which was to come.

Soon we will journey with Jesus and the disciples as we travel through Holy Week to the cross. We will spend time with him in the Garden of Gethsemane when he pleads with the Father to let this cup pass from him. Yet in spite of his pleading, he delivers himself to death. The most costly sacrifice.

So was Mary's act wasteful or worshipful? Or rather, was the fact that it was worshipful sufficient to justify the apparent waste? Jesus obviously thought so!

The perfume was wasted because of what it cost; if it had been cheap perfume there would have been no waste to complain of. It's the value of the perfume that makes Mary's act wasteful, rather than the fact that it was perfume.

The other night I was watching *Invictus*; the film of Nelson Mandela's early days as President of South Africa. Even if you haven't seen the film you will probably be aware of the controversy that he provoked, over many things but perhaps especially over his support for the Springboks, the South African rugby team. For black people in South Africa the Springboks were an emblem of white supremacy and some of the black community were campaigning to have even the name eradicated from the language. Mandela took seriously the fact that he was president of the whole country, black and white, and saw the rugby world cup as an opportunity to unite the whole country in a single cause. The opposition to his support for the Springboks was fierce. The black community saw Mandela's presidency as an opportunity to get their own back. To be in charge and relegate the whites to the position of underdog. After 27 years in prison you might the Mandela would feel the same. And perhaps he did, but he didn't allow his feelings to affect his judgement and he made what I am sure was the costly sacrifice of eschewing revenge in favour of policies which would unite the country. For many of the black population this would have seemed like a wasted opportunity, and Mandela was heavily criticised. But he succeeded.

A wasted opportunity? Or a costly but necessary sacrifice?

Sometimes we think that we don't have time to spend with God in prayer. I know I struggle as much as anybody to make that a priority. It can feel like a sacrifice to take time out of a busy day to read the bible and pray, and perhaps the busier we are the more it seems like a sacrifice of time that we just can't make.

Bill Hybels, the senior pastor of Willow Creek Community church tells a story of the early days of his ministry in Chicago when he was trying to establish a church. He knew that prayer was the basis on which this church would be built so every morning he would get up at 6.00am, make himself a cup of coffee and pray. He intended to spend an hour praying for his growing church. Instead he found himself praising and enjoying the presence of God. At the same time he found the church was growing, and people were coming to faith. Notwithstanding this apparent success, he felt guilty about not actually praying about all that needed to be done. He said, "one day when I was praising God and enjoying his presence, I said to him, 'Lord, shouldn't I be praying for all these people?' and I felt him say to me, 'you just keep doing what you're doing and I'll keep doing what I'm doing'". Wasting time with God was more productive for Bill than spending hours going through all the details of the things he felt needed prayer.

It all depends on what we mean by the word waste. And perhaps our definition of waste depends on the result we want. If what we want is to get through a list of tasks then it will indeed seem like a waste to spend time in prayer. But if what we want is to be more effective as Christians, then is that not exactly what we need to do? I wonder if we can be less afraid of wasting time, and be more content just to be with God? To spend time in his presence, to give him the gift of our company in wasteful extravagance as Mary poured out her love for him. We might be surprised at the results, because in fact nothing we do for God is ever wasted and it is that time that we spend in his presence that prepares us and equips us for our work in the world.

***Waste time with God – it's an opportunity you won't get again.***

**Glory be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, world without end, amen**

*Rev Jane Denniston  
Campsie Parish Church*