

## **The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume**

Isaiah 43:16–21

Psalm 126

Philippians 3:4b–14

John 12:1–8

### **Text: John 12:3**

Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

### **Introduction**

Your sense of smell is important; it plays a significant role in choosing food, avoiding harm, deciding who our spouse is, and plays a role in taste. In scripture the role of the sense of smell, both literal and metaphorical, is routinely discussed. Remember Isaac, as his eyesight failed, smelled the garments Jacob had worn as a disguise. God is said to smell. (Leviticus 26:31); incense was prescribed to be used as a routine part of Israel's sacrifices in worship. "Perfume and incense make the heart glad," says the Proverbs (27:9). In the heavenly worship scene before the throne of God, described in the Revelation of John, we are told that "the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God." (Revelation 8:4). In his Philippian letter Paul described the financial support they sent him when he was in prison as "a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God." (Phil 4:18). And in another of Paul's letters he wrote, "Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Ephesians 5:2).

I invite you to reflect with me today on the fragrance that filled the house at this evening dinner party given for Jesus. Yes, every one in the room knew what perfume it was. Judas knew precisely what it would have cost; three hundred denarii represented a year's wages for someone fully employed. But that isn't the fragrance I am inviting you to think about; rather, it is the fragrance of Mary's act that I ask you to let waft into your metaphorical nostrils. What odor does it give off? We often describe someone's behaviour in terms of its metaphorical odor. The cost of the perfume is one thing; it was an expensive odor, to be sure. But we must also admit to the intimacy of the act. It is one thing to wash Jesus' feet—foot washing was common—but to wipe them with her hair? This is the sort of intimate act between two people we look away from; we don't want to be caught staring. Our sensibilities say, this is a private matter.

1. “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?,” asks God through the prophet Isaiah. Our reading from Isaiah today is part of a section that proclaims deliverance for Israelites who are in exile in Babylon. Whereas God had previously used Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian hordes to destroy Jerusalem and take them into exile as judgement of their sin, now dramatically Isaiah announces that God is about to use Cyrus and his Persian forces to defeat Babylon and release captive Israel, allowing them to return to their homeland.

The rescue is poetically described in terms of a way being made in the wilderness and being given fresh abundant water in a desert place. “I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert,” says God, “...for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.” I invite you to underline the purpose God reveals for the rescue of his people; “so that they might declare my praise.”

We know that God’s word is rich with fulfilments that comes to light long after the historical moment of the people to whom the word was first addressed. When Christians read this word from God, “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?, they can’t help but to think of Jesus. We perceive new things God does in Jesus by faith as the Spirit of God does that work in our hearts from which it springs forth. The purpose that Jesus has for calling a people to be his, to be the church, is so that we might declare his praise.

Now, back to my question about the fragrance of Mary’s act. I invite you to consider that the fragrance of Mary’s act is the fragrance of the praise of God. We may be uncomfortable with the intimacy of her action but isn’t Mary’s act the act of one who has abandoned herself to Jesus? There are other examples in the Bible of people being criticized for acts of worship. When King David brought the ark of God to Jerusalem we are told that “David danced before the Lord with all his might; David was girded with a linen ephod.” David’s wife Michal was not impressed—in his exuberant dancing David may have exposed himself given that he wore only a lined ephod. The scriptures do not criticize David for this and Jesus defends Mary. To be sure this was not David’s weekly worship routine nor would Jesus countenance Mary to make this act a regular occurrence. These are special occasions. But they are occasions of the praise of God, nonetheless.

What or who you worship matters. Worship profoundly impacts life. In our culture we have kicked God upstairs or basically ignored Him and installed this rather low

ceiling over our heads. We have told our young people to look within for significance; that you determine your own destiny; that the highest good is ‘your’ truth. And this is having disastrous results as young people struggle to determine a sense of identity. Such uncertainty creates a real sense of anguish that crushes the spirit of a person.

Take a look at Judas in this story. He knows the dollar value of everything. He saw the size of the jar Mary had, smelled its contents, and immediately the cash register of his mind rung up the amount. What does he worship? John tells us that he had managed to become the group’s treasurer—he does have excellent financial acumen—and was a thief stealing from the common purse. Wealth is ever calling for us to worship it. Jesus said you can’t worship both God and money. Look what it did to Judas—he sold out our Lord for the price commonly paid for a slave.

But Mary shows us the way. We are made for relationship with God. This act of hers is an act of her love for Jesus. She was the one who sat at Jesus’ feet as a student; recall that Jesus said she chose the better thing; as a disciple who listened attentively to Jesus she knows his great love for her. She had witnessed, a couple of weeks before this dinner, how Jesus had raised her brother Lazarus from the dead. She is profoundly grateful. The dinner was to honour Jesus—Lazarus was at the table, we are told. Mary knows what having her brother back tells her about Jesus and who he is—he is the One worthy of her worship. The emphasis is on who Jesus is not on who she is—she finds who she truly is in relationship to Jesus. And notice in her abandonment of herself to Jesus she is perfectly safe. It matters who you worship. You become like the one (or thing) you worship.

Friends, Mary is also held up by John in this story as an example for us believers; certainly in contrast to Judas. The purpose for which God has called us to faith in Jesus Christ, made us His own, and turned us to one another in the church is so that we might be the people who declare his praise. For the Church the public worship of God is the most important thing we do. It witnesses to the world that only God is worthy of human worship. The word ‘liturgy’ derives from a technical term in ancient Greek that literally means “work of the people.” The Greek word was a combination of two other words that meant “public service.” While I would never diminish the value of joining worship online, public worship of God is a together-with-others event. We value online worship because we know the experience of being in the house. Our Lord’s great love expressed for us on the cross has a view to bringing us together to praise him. It is how we express our love for Him—Mary’s act, though intimate, was a public act when she was together with Jesus’ followers.

2. Paul's epistle to the Philippians overflows with effervescent joy, sparkling with the delight of family affection. It is encouraging and refreshing, reminding readers of the sheer magnificence of Jesus the Messiah, and of their common joy in him.<sup>1</sup> The portion we read from this letter today comes from a section where Paul is warning against some false teachers, whose teaching would deflect them away from their devotion to the worship of God in Jesus Christ. In the midst of addressing the specifics of this false teaching, he writes, "I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." (Philippians 3:8)

Again returning to the fragrance of Mary's act that fills the room. I would invite you to consider that the fragrance of Mary's abandonment of herself to Jesus is the fragrance of regarding everything as loss because of the surpassing value of Jesus Christ her Lord. This commitment that Paul describes so beautifully in words, Mary demonstrates in her action. Just like Paul who counted all his achievements—which, by the way were significant—as rubbish for Jesus' sake, so too Mary willingly throws caution to the wind—expense and decorum seem unimportant compared to her devotion to Jesus. She knows what is in her heart with respect to Jesus and so does Jesus. And it makes some people in the room very nervous.

"But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him)," writes the Apostle John, "said, 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?'" Does Judas have a point? On one level I suppose he does. The vial of perfume could have been sold and the proceeds given to the poor. When Jesus defended Mary's action he said to Judas, "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." When Jesus said "you always have the poor with you" he is reminding Judas of a text of scripture from Deuteronomy they both know. The full text says, "Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land.'" (Deuteronomy 15:11) Jesus' word to Judas was, as the treasurer, he had not lacked opportunity to open his hand to the poor. But that is not what is in Judas' heart.

The one thing we must never do, of course, is use the text, "you always have the poor with you" as a pretext for doing nothing. As Mary lavishes the costliest perfume on our Lord, some hard-hearted nit-pickers pick, "It could have been sold

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<sup>1</sup> N.T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, *The New Testament in Its World*, Zondervan, 2019. p. 434.

and the proceeds given to the poor”. Yes, it could have. But life can’t be reduced to the functional. Unselfconscious gratitude can’t be measured. Love can’t be exchanged for currency. The kingdom of God, while certainly including the material, cannot be reduced to the material. Mary’s gratitude was incalculable just because our Lord’s gift of himself to her was incalculable.

Perhaps, like me, you too have bought something for someone you love deeply that you knew you had no business buying; but you did it anyway. Now you didn’t make a habit of it and yes it was way above your pay grade but you can’t put a price tag on love. Of course Mary’s act was a waste in one sense; in another sense, no waste at all, since it was categorically different from all considerations of waste and usefulness and thrift and expedience. It can be considered waste as long as a price tag is attached to the perfume; it can’t be considered waste as long as no price can be affixed to love. And therein lies the difference. Judas’ heart is shrivelled by his attachment to money. He hasn’t allowed the love Mary allowed to fill her heart to fill his. Does anyone want to suggest that Mary should have sent an email instead?

Jesus said of Mary, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.” Is this a motive imputed by Jesus to Mary without her being conscious of it, so that her act is accepted by him as having a more profound significance than she could have intended? Many scholars interpret it this way. On the other hand some view Jesus’ interpretation as bringing to light Mary’s intention: Mary consciously recognized the necessity of the death of Jesus, and also, recognizing that the hour had come, anticipated his burial by an act of devotion.

I am of the conviction that Mary had bought this perfume anticipating Jesus’ death. The gospel writer Luke tells us of another occasion when Jesus was at this same home. I referred to it briefly already. On that occasion we are told that Mary “sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying.” We are to understand that this was typical of Mary when in the presence of Jesus. She is a disciple who drinks in all that our Lord would teach. The gospel writers tell us that at this point in Jesus’ ministry his saying that ‘The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised,’ had become a main staple of his teaching. Mary seems to have taken his teaching to heart.

John tells us that this dinner in honour of Jesus took place six days before the Passover; six days before that awful Friday we call Good Friday, God’s Friday. It

is Saturday evening; tomorrow is the Sunday of our Lord's triumphal entry. Mary, unlike Judas, seems to know the moment she is in—"but you do not always have me," Jesus said to Judas. Her heart is bursting. She can't wait for his burial, it is too much for; so she gets the perfume now and anoints his feet in this act of devotion and love. Somehow she knows Jesus goes up to Jerusalem to die for her—and we know, for us too.

I wonder sometimes what odor the fragrance of my discipleship gives off. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.