**3rd April 2022**

**Call to worship**

Waking up this morning,
we see a new day has dawned.
Let us raise our hands in thanksgiving
for the wonders of being alive,
for the 24 brand-new hours in which we are now living,
and the possibility of so many, many more.

**A gathering prayer**

*Invite people to be still and quiet for a while,*
*consciously noticing their own breathing.*

Wonderful God,
thank you for the sensations of sacred breath,
your miraculous gift of life to each one of us.
We lift our hearts to you.
Our souls sing with joy.
May we know your presence in all our challenges,
and may our thankfulness pour out of our lives.
In Jesus’ name. **Amen.**

**A prayer of approach**

Giving God,
no money can buy your love,
no words can adequately express our thanks,
no actions can fully demonstrate our gratitude.
But as we sing, as we pray, as we listen to your Word,
we offer you our best,
and celebrate your presence with us –
now and each moment of every day.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of adoration**

Creator God, loving Saviour, living Spirit,
we celebrate your generosity
in receiving all that we would give you.
We rejoice in your generosity
as you pour out your blessing on all you have made.
We commit ourselves to reflecting your generosity in our lives,
by giving the best of all we have and are wherever there is need. **Amen.**

**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

**A prayer of confession**

Please, forgive us, faithful God,
when we fill the rooms we enter with negativity, not warmth.
**Forgive us, and bless us with love like that of Mary.**
Forgive us when we justify our reluctance to give and share.
**Forgive us, and bless us with love like that of Mary.**
Forgive us when we are slow to express gratitude,
and take what we have for granted.
**Forgive us, and bless us with love like that of Mary.**
In Jesus’ name we pray. **Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

Ever-giving God,
we sometimes close our hearts to you and to others;
but your heart is always open,
pouring out your grace and love,
filling our lives with the fragrance of forgiveness
and friendship,
wiping away our fears and our regrets,
and receiving the thanks we would offer you.
May the trickle of our praise become a torrent,
and may the whole world be filled with your truth.
In Jesus’ name we pray.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

For the unselfconscious outpouring of Mary’s love:
**we praise you!**
For the generous receiving of her beautiful gift by Jesus:
**we praise you!**
For the opportunities we have to give to others:
**we praise you!**
For friends and family who give to us:
**we praise you!**
For your love and for the promise of eternal life:
**we praise you!**
Father, Son and Holy Spirit:
**we praise you!**
**Amen.**



**John 12.1-11**

**Sermon**

This week saw the 94th Academy Awards (the Oscars) take place in a glittering ceremony, which became embroiled in controversy as [Will Smith slapped the comedian Chris Rock](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-60909487) live on stage. The comedian, Rock, was presenting an award when he made a joke about Smith’s wife – Jada Pinkett Smith - who suffers from hair loss due to alopecia. This was not the first time Rock had used Jada Pinkett Smith as comedy material (he made remarks on her publicly in 2016), and her husband Will Smith left his seat to slap Rock in the face before using some choice language to insist that Rock refrain from mentioning his wife again.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Later in the ceremony, Smith took the award for best actor for his performance in [*King Richard*, a film exploring the life of the father of Venus and Serena Williams](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9620288/). In his acceptance speech, a tearful Smith apologised for his actions but remarked that Richard Williams had also been a “fierce defender of his family”.

In this week’s passage, we see Jesus defending Mary from the comments of others, as she anoints his feet with costly perfume, albeit in a markedly less violent way. I wonder how it felt to be Mary, hearing Jesus defend her actions. I wonder how it felt to be Jada watching her husband Will defend her honour…

There are many nuances to both events. Each centres around a group of people who each have their own stories, triggers, agendas, humanity.

* Is it ever right to respond with violence in any given situation?
* Is it ever right to use someone’s appearance/illness for a cheap laugh?
* Is it ok to be seemingly wasteful with something that could have done so much good for those in poverty?
* Is it okay to do whatever feels right to defend another?
* Is it ever right to cancel someone on the basis of one action?
* Is it possible to sort through a situation and rewrite it in the perfect way?

In a society increasingly devoid of grey areas – where you are either right or wrong – how can we learn to see situations through the lens of grace and mercy and understanding?

This is one of those stories that can be overlaid and obscured by all manner of applications. For instance, it has been used as a justification for not addressing injustice, by saying: ‘Jesus said that the poor will be always with us, so that’s just a fact of life that we cannot change’.

It has also been used as a justification for grand church buildings: ‘Jesus was pleased when the perfume was lavished on him, so he must be pleased when we spend our money on this silver or oak to show how much we love him’.

I have a couple of colleagues whose churches have received windfalls of hundreds of thousands of pounds from members who have died and left their estate to the church. A great blessing for the work of the church. But needless to say their relatives weren’t that pleased that the church got all the money from their hoped for inheritance!

These applications sometimes feel so compelling that we can find ourselves siding with Judas and wanting to object – why was this not sold and the money given to the poor? Why do we have to cope with this irrational and troublesome action?

Perhaps one place to start is to see this as a specific story, happening at a specific time, not a general piece of teaching about wealth. When Jesus says, ‘Leave her alone’ (v.7), perhaps he means exactly that: stop bullying her, and recognise her gift of love as I do.

This is not a theoretical discussion of what to do with wealth, it is a moment of inarticulate, lavish, embarrassing love; the action of a woman whose devotion overrides her sense of propriety. The cost of the perfume is hard to estimate in today’s money, but if we take the fact that a denarius is referred to as a day’s wage for a labourer (cf. Matthew 20.2; John 12.5), then 300 denarii is close to a year’s salary at a basic level – a massively extravagant ointment to pour out! Like the pearl merchant who sells everything to buy one pearl, and like the Pharisee who gives up his career, Mary of Bethany gives her all.

This story is about spending everything on what seems to be a futile gesture, and about giving away everything you have for another person.

I wonder if you have ever been really really generous. Usually our giving and our gifts are calculated. They are what we can spare. What we can live without. Our needs first. Then maybe….

But some do give over and above.

It is a tremendously humble privilege to observe those who watch and wait at the side of the dying, and for those who work in hospices or with those near to death, as they pour out their care at the precious time of the ending of life. Relatives and loved ones doing round the clock vigils by bedsides, expending themselves because of love and devotion.

Likewise, those who care for the frail and elderly and the disabled. I see the care of parents to children who have special needs, whose behaviour can be challenging to say the least and to say it euphemistically. Those who act as foster carers taking in children who have been abused or damaged or rejected – knowing this will be an ongoing struggle to repair what has been broken. The sacrificial commitment to those who have addictive behaviors, who struggle with guilt and self-loathing, self-pity and destructive behavior – hanging in there, hoping against hope that one day they may be free. I could go on with other scenarios of spending everything on what seems futile: giving away everything you have for another person. Inspired by love.

On the journey towards Jerusalem, Jesus pauses for a meal in Bethany that John in his gospel presents as a sacred moment. Martha is serving, her brother Lazarus, who Jesus has just raised from the dead in the previous chapter, is present, and their sister Mary engages with Jesus very publicly, showing her devotion by her action and her costly worship. She pours out some expensive lotion (we are told it costs a year’s wages) on Jesus’ feet and wipes it with her hair.

She and Martha have equal reason to be grateful for the raising of Lazarus, and they show their gratitude in worship and action respectively.

The woman risks shame and rebuke but sees something that she must do for Jesus. It is irrelevant to her that she could have spent the money on a more ‘worthwhile cause’; it is simply enough that she obeyed the inner prompting of her heart and offered her all in response to Jesus. There is no way that this kind of love can be measured or calculated.

Is self-giving love sensible or contained? No.
Can it be embarrassing to see its extravagance? Sometimes.
Is it compelling? Absolutely!

Mother Teresa was known for her sacrificial love to the street beggars of Calcutta. In a caste system and a belief in karma and reincarnation that saw those who were begging as somehow deserving of their fate and therefore to be disregarded, Mother Teresa showed love and dignity.

In his poem *Mother Teresa,*Sydney Carter writes:

Over this dead loss to society
You pour your precious ointment,
wash the feet
that will not walk tomorrow.

Mother Teresa, Mary Magdalene – your love is dangerous.

Peter Owen Jones puts it like this in his book *Small Boat, Big Sea*(Lion Publishing 2001, p.6): ‘*Real love is expensive. So it should be - it demands part of us.’*

Do we have this kind of dangerously generous love at the heart of our mission statement? Well, we have dared to say that we as a church are inspired by Jesus: walking his way of radical love. As we draw near to Easter we meditate once again on the cross and the sacrifice of love Jesus gave on Calvary.

My song is love unknown,
My Saviour’s love to me;
Love to the loveless shown,
That they might lovely be.
O who am I,
That for my sake
My Lord should take
Frail flesh, and die?

Martha and Mary had their brother Lazarus back from the dead because Jesus is the resurrection and the Life: priceless. They responded by giving their all. Our gratitude and worship to God comes freely after we have been the recipients of God’s grace and love: when we have known the true cost of the cross for us; when we have personally known that Jesus died for us, for me.

May this Holy Week remind you once again of the sin of the world, its gravity and seriousness, the need for a saviour, the sacrifice that involved, the debt we owe, yet the grace that is offered to us.

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

We sing all these words – take them in, go deeper in to the salvation and life offered to us through Jesus.

We live in a world that is becoming more mean and less generous – even more so when the headlines keep reminding us of the rising costs of living – we need every penny we can get. The world is more suspicious of difference and less tolerant; more divided and less able to take the bold steps that are necessary to make peace. There is such a contrast between the wild extravagance of the woman pouring out the expensive perfume and the mean-spirited Judas counting up the cost and taking even what does not rightfully belong to him.

Judas has his own agenda which, according to John, is more about personal gain than concern for the poor. On this occasion, Jesus declines to get involved in a discussion about charitable giving and commends Mary for her costly worship.

But, despite many interpretations through the centuries, Jesus’ comments should not be taken as a manifesto regarding giving – or not – to the poor. Rather, it is about the true value and place of worship. We should be asking ourselves if our worship is the sort that fills the room – and the world – with its fragrance. Showing love in Jesus name – to rich or poor. The charity at home and the charity that extends to the neighbour overseas.

In the end, it does not matter how little you have; what really matters is what you chose to do with what you do have. It is not only a moment of extravagance that counts, but also the discipline of cultivating an attitude of gratitude so that when the moment comes for a sacrificial action, we know in our hearts how to respond. What can I do for you Lord?

A couple of weeks ago at our AGM we were reminded of the sacrifices people make in time, money and talents to keep this church going and doing stuff that we hope and pray makes a difference for the better. Most of that work is voluntarily and freely given, for which we are all collectively so grateful. Like Mary – it is freely and willingly given – out of love and gratitude to God – and some are able and willing to give a lot and others aren’t - and I hope we all understand that and make no judgements. We are all the church, wherever we are – so Christian witness and service is as much in the workplace as it is in these buildings. None is more special than another. All is part of our calling and sacrifice of love as we walk the way of Jesus.

Mary’s action is prophetic though in two ways. First, as Jesus says, it is a sign of his own imminent burial. Like the women who follow Jesus to the cross and the tomb, Mary does not look away as Jesus’ suffering and death draw near. She stays with him through the pain and agony.

Second, this may well have been the act that inspired Jesus to wash his disciples’ feet in the following chapter. Acts of love and kindness often prompt those who receive them to show the same love and kindness to others – and this infectious principle underlies the new commandment that Jesus then gives his disciples: ‘Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another’ (John 13.34).

Like the parable of the great pearl, this story also teaches us to understand more about our worth in God’s eyes. We are the pearl that God gives up his all to find; we are the ones who are tired, we are the ones with feet that are dirty from our life journey. ‘What can I do for you?’ asks the Lord. And he washes our feet and welcomes us home.

**Prayers of intercession**

*We think first of all the good things around us and the blessings we have received this week using the following refrain:*

Leader: Lord, we long to live thankfully
All: **Help our thanks to pour out.**

Lord, we thank you for all the goodness we have seen around us this week: for kindness of friends and strangers; for signs of spring bursting forth in our gardens, parks, fields and hedgerows; for sunshine and warmth. We thank you for friends to play with and food to eat.

We think, in silence, of a particularly special moment this week and thank you.

Lord, we long to live thankfully
**Help our thanks to pour out.**

Lord, we thank you for moments of busyness this week and moments of calm. We thank you for all those people who have crossed our path this week. We thank you for unexpected moments of goodness and joy, even in the midst of pain.

Lord, we long to live thankfully
**Help our thanks to pour out.**

Lord, we thank you for our favourite food, our favourite games and toys, our favourite music, our favourite books and hobbies. We thank you for all the good things in our lives that we take for granted sometimes. Help us to see the worth and value in everything and everyone.

Lord, we long to live thankfully
**Help our thanks to pour out.**

We turn our thoughts and prayers now to the needs of the world around us, both far away and close at hand. Using the following refrain:

Lord, we long to live lovingly.
**Help our love to pour out.**

Lord, we continue to cry out to you for Ukraine. We thank you for those who are trying to work for peace. We pray for all who have been displaced from their homes, asking that they may find new life and love in unfamiliar places. We pray for those left behind, still living with the daily terrors of attack and not knowing what will happen next. We remember all those who have died, some of whom are known only to you.

Lord, we long to live lovingly.
**Help our love to pour out.**

We pray for girls in Afghanistan, once again refused an education. We pray that the Taliban will reverse its decision and listen to your voice, encouraging equality for everyone. We pray for all the places in conflict in our world, currently out of the headlines. Show us how we can help and support all those who need food, shelter and education to enable them to prosper.

Lord, we long to live lovingly.
**Help our love to pour out.**

We pray for our country, especially as the cost of living soars and all of us have to tighten our belts and make do with less. Show us how to support each other, even when we might be struggling ourselves. Give us a spirit of generosity and help us to be content with what we need rather than what we want. We pray for all who work in our foodbanks, our homeless hostels and our support networks.  We remember all children in care and pray for those who work to find them permanent homes. We continue to lift to you all those who work in our health care system, as Covid still runs rife in our communities.

Lord, we long to live lovingly.
**Help our love to pour out.**

We also pray for all the communities we are part of: where we live, our church, our schools, places of work and our homes. Give us joyful hearts and generous spirits, so that we give our best to others. We remember all who are ill or sad at this time and all who are anxious or housebound.

Lord, we long to live lovingly.
**Help our love to pour out.**

Finally, Lord, we commit the week ahead to you. We ask that you travel with us in our work, our play, our joys and sorrows. Help us to find space to breathe your fragrance and offer ourselves and all we have to you for you to make whole, strong and beautiful.

**Lord, we long to live with you with thankfulness and love.
We ask you to pour out your blessings
So that we can pour them out to others.
Amen.**



**A prayer for all ages together**

*Stand in one or more large circles, holding hands.*

Loving God, we thank you for your love for us,
and we thank you for each other.
Bow to the person opposite, and to those on either side.
Turn round and face outwards, again holding hands.
Loving God, as your love pours into our lives,
help us to show and share it with those outside our circle.
Bow to the world and people around your circle.
Be with us wherever we go. **Amen.**



**A sending out prayer**

Amazing God,
we are so thankful for the gift of being alive!
May our thankfulness to you pour out in our actions,
in our choices, in our dealings with other people,
in all that we do. **Amen.**

**Prayer**

Lord of our beginning and our ending:

may we know that we are loved;
may we learn how to stay open to your love;
may we embrace the fullness of life you offer us.

May we learn to live as if now is the time;
may we live in open hearted and generous ways;
may we know where to find comfort in community when we need a safe place.

May we find the courage to love as you loved us;
may we walk where you lead us and trust in your promise to be with us;
may we know deep in our hearts your generous, powerful and tender love
surrounding us, feeding us, and making us whole –
today and always.
**Amen.**

* *like the Queen -****thankful****for the life of someone we’ve lost;*
* ***thankful****for the generosity of the people who keep food banks going during rising poverty;*
* ***thankful****for peacekeepers and people opening their homes to refugees;*
* ***thankful****for positive opportunities that create inclusion.*

***Anointing with fragrant oil***

*You will need: fragrant essential oil (it could be the oil used in Share the Word) poured into a small shallow dish; a card that says (the words of Cardinal Newman): ‘Jesus, help me to spread your fragrance everywhere I go. Amen.’*

*Invite people to anoint each other on their wrist with the oil. Encourage those anointed to say the words on the card, and to thank God for the person anointing them. W E S*

***A gift to be thankful***

* *Play quiet background music – ideally, Aaron Copland’s ‘Simple Gifts’, or something similar. Read these words by Meister Eckhart: ‘If the only prayer you said in your whole life was “thank you” that would be sufficient.‘*
* *Ask everyone to think of one specific thing that has made their heart sing with thankfulness during the past few days. Invite a few willing people to share their thoughts. Ask if anyone knows of a recent event or occasion when someone was specially thanked and invite them to describe it. What difference does it make to say thank you? And if we don’t?*
* *Today’s Gospel reading is the story of Martha, Mary and Lazarus – who invited Jesus to a special meal to say thank you for bringing Lazarus back to life. Mary made it extra special by doing something extraordinary. It was so surprising, we are still talking about it today!*

*Taken from* [*https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2019/100-march-april-2019-c/lent-5-passion-sunday/postscript*](https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2019/100-march-april-2019-c/lent-5-passion-sunday/postscript)

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1. <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2022/118-march-april-2022-c/lent-5/the-week-in-focus> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)