Stowe 1662 Sunday 6th April 25

John 12: 1-8

Our Gospel reading today comes only days before Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem, on a donkey at Palm Sunday, and this is such a personal story.

We already know that Mary, Martha and Lazarus are close friends with Jesus. Jesus has just raised Lazarus from the dead and here He joins the family for a meal, most likely to celebrate the raising of Lazarus back to life. And it is a meal in Bethany and according to Matthew and Mark the meal happens at the house of Simon the leper. In fact some scholars think that Simon may have been a relative of the family as Martha is clearly the hostess of the meal.

At a previous meal Jesus had with the family, we know that Martha was busy working in the kitchen and being a good hostess, while Mary sat listening to Jesus’ teaching, sitting at his feet. And in our reading today Martha is busy cooking and preparing food again, whilst again Mary is focused solely on Jesus. As we heard Mary takes a pound in weight of perfumed oil and she anoints Jesus feet with the oil and the Bible tells us that the house is filed with the beautiful perfume from the oil. Perfumes oil was expensive, a luxury item. A pint of this oil was worth roughly a years wages for a working class man. And In some ways this is such a loving thing for Mary to do and in other ways it can be seen as quite an extravagant thing for Mary to do too.

Mary, we know, had a heart for Jesus; sitting at his feet and listening to him. Mary loved Jesus and she probably knew that Jesus was heading for Jerusalem, the stronghold of the Jewish authorities, and she must have know how risky this could be for Jesus. And as a gesture of her love she takes perhaps the most precious thing she owns, and certainly the most valuable thing she owns, and she uses it for Jesus.

When a guest entered a house in those times a lowly servant would wash their feet and the guest’s head would be anointed with a drop of oil, but Mary uses a pound of oil, not a drop, and she uses it on Jesus feet not his head. It is a sign of huge humility on Mary’s part – she does not anoint his head but his feet. It echoes with Jesus himself washing his disciples feet at the last supper. And then Mary does something even more surprising as she wipes Jesus feet with her hair. A respectable woman at that time would not let her hair fall loose in public. A grown woman would always tie her hair up but Mary is completely unselfconscious, she loosens her hair and in a very personal gesture she uses her hair like a towel for Jesus’ feet. I think sometimes Christians can be self conscious about expressing their love for Jesus. Perhaps it is easier to express faith and devotion than to express love, for love is personal and relational. But here Mary gives us an amazing example of unselfconscious wholehearted love for Jesus. She doesn’t seem to notice that other people are in the room, she is not embarrassed that her brother and sister are there. It is a humble act of love for Jesus to give him the most valuable thing she has.

Judas is also in the story. The Bible tells us that Judas was the disciple in charge of the money box. Richer supporters of Jesus would support his ministry by giving money to support Jesus and his disciples, so they could buy food and other necessities, and Judas would look after these donations. And Judas thinks that Mary has been extravagant. He says why didn’t you sell the oil and use the money to help the poor. John writes that Judas was a thief and would steal money from the money box. So the implication is that Judas wants the oil sold and the money put into the money box, so that he can cream some of it off for himself. This is the only occasion in the Bible where Judas is portrayed as dishonest apart from when he betrays Jesus to the authorities in the garden of Gethsemene. Alternatively, perhaps Judas really did want to use all the money to benefit the poor, we don’t know for sure.

But Jesus supports Mary. Jesus appreciates what Mary has done and he says that the oil would have been used to anoint his body after his death, so is it not better for Mary to use the oil while he is still alive and can appreciate the oil. Jesus says that they will always have the poor but he will not always be with them. I don’t think for a minute that Jesus approves of poverty, quite the reverse in fact. But I think that in many ways this is a very human moment for Jesus. He knows he is going to die, and die in only a few days time and I think he appreciated the love and kindness that Mary was showing him. It is sadly sometimes true that when someone we care about dies, sometimes we may regret not telling them how much we cared for them, how much we loved them. And here Mary does let Jesus know very clearly how much she loves him.

Reading this passage made me think of the parable of the pearl of great price. When the man in the parable finds the pearl he sells everything he has to obtain it, and Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is like that. Following Jesus as the way to the kingdom is worth more than any material objects or wealth that we may have, and Mary here illustrates that perfectly for us.