

SERMON FOR SUNDAY 13 MARCH 2016

PRESENTED BY DICK MCDONALD, CONGREGATIONAL MEMBER

THEME: EXTRAVAGANT LOVE?

FOCUS TEXT: JOHN 12:1-8

SUMMARY FOR DELIVERY:

- We renew our earlier encounter with Martha and Mary. On that occasion Martha had rebuked Mary for sitting at Jesus' feet while she, Martha, worked. Jesus had in turn corrected her "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better (needed) and it will not be taken away from her."
- Between then and now Jesus has raised Mary and Martha's brother Lazarus from the dead and they are holding a celebration meal with Jesus as guest of honour. It was the last supper before the Last Supper, a transition point for his last journey into Jerusalem.
- The setting for his event is the village of Bethany, 2 miles east of Jerusalem on the road to Jericho.
- Jesus' raising of Lazarus has not endeared him to the chief Priests and Pharisees; he is on their "most wanted list" – it is the beginning of the end, the day before he enters Jerusalem for the last time. To come to Jerusalem for the Passover was an act of the highest courage for the authorities had in effect made him an outlaw.
- Picture the scene. Jesus is here with his "old friends", those he liked to be with, and who understood and believed in him.
- For a long time Mary's eyes were on Jesus. She had seen him in many situations, happy, sad as at Lazarus's grave, and on this occasion, knowing what is to come probably pensive and quiet.
- Then at a sudden lull in the conversation, Mary moved silently forward, kneels at Jesus' feet, pours a pint of the pure nard, an expensive perfume, on Jesus' feet and then wipes his feet with her loosened hair.
- As she looked up she almost certainly would have become aware of a murmur around the table, and the house being filled with the fragrance of the perfume. She would probably have heard the clucking of disapproving tongues and words like waste and cost, Martha's sob of how could you, and Judas's sounding off about "the money that should have been given to the poor". But the silent look of thanks from Jesus, and

then his spoken words were more than enough.

- Lazarus, Martha and Mary are of great faith but Mary, although only mentioned in 3 incidents, is seen to listen carefully to Jesus' teaching and to fall at his feet in worship on 2 occasions. But what is it about Mary that inspires faith and why is she singled out by Jesus for special commendation?
- I believe it is because her character highlights a number of aspects about love which we read earlier this year and is elevated to the highest honour in 1 Corinthians 13.
- Firstly we see love's extravagance. Mary took the most precious thing she possessed and poured it in on Jesus. Both Mark and John say this perfume could have been sold for 300 denarii, which represents nearly a whole year's wages for a working man. Think of it this way when Jesus and his disciples were discussing how the multitude were to be fed, Philip's view was that 200 denarii would scarcely be enough to feed them. This phial of perfume, therefore cost as much as it would take to feed a crowd of 5000 people. She gave the most precious thing she had. Love never calculates; never thinks how little it can decently give; it seeks to give to the uttermost limits, and even when it has given all it has to give it still thinks the gift too little.
- Secondly we see love's humility. It was a sign of honour to anoint a person's head with oil – Ps23:5, but Mary would not look so high as the head of Jesus; she anointed his feet. The last thing Mary thought of was to confer an honour upon Jesus; she never dreamed she was good enough for that.
- Thirdly we see love's selflessness. Mary wiped Jesus' feet with her hair. In Palestine no respectable woman would ever appear in public with her hair unbound – that was the sign of an immoral woman, but Mary never thought of that. Many of us are self-conscious about showing our Christianity; concerned about what others may be thinking. Mary loved Jesus so much that it was nothing to her what others thought.
- Finally true love is unconditional. Remember 1 Corinthians 13 – that we read a few weeks ago.
- There are 3 other things to be noted. Firstly there are times when common sense view of things fails. Common sense would have dictated prudence, but true love obeys the dictates of the heart. A gift is never really gift when we can easily afford it; a gift truly becomes a gift when there is sacrifice associated with the giving.
- Secondly certain things must be done when the opportunity arises, and to miss that opportunity is to miss it forever.

- Thirdly the “fragrance of a lovely gift lasts forever”. At the end of Jesus’ life there was so much bitterness, treachery, intrigue and tragedy that this story shines like a bright light.
- But what about Judas’s assertion - “why....wasn’t this perfume sold....and the money given to the poor? And indeed, why not? It does seem incredibly wasteful, almost sinful. Why not honour Jesus by giving to the poor? Yet Jesus does not see it this way. Instead he approves of her action, telling Judas that he should leave Mary alone. “the poor you will always have with you; but you will not always have me”. Mary’s use of the perfume on him perhaps achieves a more meaningful purpose than she had intended or was even aware of; announcing the nearness of Jesus’ death and preparing for his funeral (John 12:7).
- In summary Jesus affirmed that his teaching and his work was for people such as Mary, people who believed and trusted in him. Her action was an example of the kind of love to which we are called. Indeed it is the kind of love Jesus himself showed us when on the day after Mary anointed his feet and dried them with her hair he rode into Jerusalem and gave himself up to death on a cross so that we might live forever with him and with the Father. During this time of lent we reflect on who we are and whose we are – a time to recommit to following the way of Jesus.