

See I am doing a new thing, Isaiah says, so keep your eyes open and don't hark back to the past otherwise you are in danger of missing out on the new things that God is doing. We need to be alert to what God is up to, because God is always up to something, because that is God's nature. And Paul too in our Philippians reading tells us of the importance of looking forwards, not back.

And my goodness, isn't he doing something new in our Gospel reading?

Have you ever received a gift of such extraordinary extravagance that your first instinct is to say out loud – you really shouldn't have – while inside you're thinking, oh my goodness I can't believe they've just done that, that's way over and above anything they need have done, I don't deserve that. And sometimes we really mean it because a gift on that scale feels as if it's something we can't live up to.

If we substituted any of our names for that of Jesus in today's Gospel reading, isn't that what our reaction would have been? After all, we're talking about the equivalent several bottles of the most expensive Chanel scent, the best part of a year of living wages. Given most people on a living wage are rarely more than two months from homelessness, the scale of Mary's extravagance is thrown into sharp relief.

This story, set shortly before Jesus' final entry into Jerusalem, is told in all four Gospels, but John, as ever, tells it differently for his own purposes. In the other three Gospels, the story is set in the house of Simon of Leper, itself an interesting choice of venue, while the woman is unnamed. Both Matthew and Mark attribute the remark about the expense to several people. Luke is the only one to describe the woman as a sinner and tells the story in a very different way to focus on forgiveness.

But John has a very different take. He sets it in Bethany – which literally means house of the poor – in the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, who Jesus has just raised from the dead: a clear pointer to the idea that death does not have the last word. Martha is serving – again. And then – again – she is upstaged by her sister, who by literally letting her hair down, behaves in a way that would have been considered scandalous in polite society.

Yet Jesus doesn't rebuke Mary, and indeed he suggests that Mary's actions had more significance than she realised in that they pointed to his own burial which was not that far away. It was an anointing in advance, which might come in handy since Jesus had a very hasty burial

John names Mary as the one who anoints Jesus' feet with spikenard, a very expensive perfume. Some commentators suggest that jar contained the equivalent of two packets of butter, which would have made Jesus' feet very gunky. No wonder she cleaned them with her hair.

It was Judas who expressed what Martha must at least have been thinking – she's gone too far this time.

But John is having none of it. throughout his Gospel John has a real downer on Judas and here he suggests that Judas didn't care about the poor at all and his real motivation behind selling the alabaster jar was so that he could steal some of the cash that would be raised from the sale. It is John who attributes to Judas alone the suggestion that the perfume should have been sold and the money given to the poor. As I mentioned earlier, Matthew and Mark suggest it was some or all of the disciples who made the remark.

John of course was writing with hindsight, but the reality was none of the disciples had a clue Judas was going to betray Jesus.

By contrast, John doesn't give us a clue about Mary's motivation – was it thankfulness for the raising of Lazarus, or a deep awareness that Jesus would not be with them for much longer? We just don't know.

Jesus's response – You will always have the poor among you but you will not always have me – seems, on the face of it, quite harsh. But any of his listeners who knew their Hebrew Scriptures would have immediately recognised it as coming from Deuteronomy 15:11, which says There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be open-handed towards your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land. We need to remember that Jesus was one of the poor, totally dependent on the generosity of others for food and shelter.

In other words, if we are called to love Jesus without limits when he is with us, then the same principle applies to our dealings with the poor, who are always with us

Yes, this may be a story about the poor, about piety, about how we use our resources, but it is also a story about a woman who loves very extravagantly and scandalously – a loud tut tut of disapproval can be heard in every Gospel – and Jesus blesses her for it.

That's a lesson in itself, but it becomes all the more striking when you consider that this Gospel reading is chosen for Lent, a time associated with abstinence and asceticism not extravagance and luxury.

But we should note that neither Jesus nor Mary thought about the cost. Mary was only thinking about the giving, and Jesus about the love behind the giving.

Jesus declares that Mary's extravagance is beautiful, worthy of being remembered. When do you last hear in a church that extravagance is beautiful? And don't we secretly half agree with Judas, or the disciples in general if you prefer the other versions of this event, that we should be cautious and sensible, focus the resources we have on the poor? Where do we

stand in this particular picture? Are we alongside Mary, Martha or even Judas? It's probably not as straightforward as we'd like to think.

Jesus is clearly on Mary's side on this one, think of the way he praises the widow for putting almost all she had in the offering plate. We heard Rowan Williams preach on these verses at Christ Church Morningside a few years ago, and he described Mary's actions as offering Jesus her dowry. What would prompt us to act with such unbridled extravagance?

We can't describe her actions as logical or efficient, rather in Judas's terms they were useless. And yet Jesus insists that there are times when beauty matters, when it takes precedence over the practical. And don't we know that from our own lives, when in times of trouble unexpected outpourings of love do more to help us than practicalities.

What's intriguing about Mary's specific form of worship, something we might learn from, is that it doesn't involve words at all. Her love and worship are enacted through her body. Was it Mary's bodily worship that prompted Jesus to wash his disciples' feet at the Last Supper in the very next chapter? Either way, they are both demonstrations of radical love. And of course Jesus' broken body on the Cross was the ultimate demonstration of radical love.

So just as the other Mary, Jesus' mother, knew the time had come for Jesus to start his public ministry at the wedding in Cana, so did this Mary's actions strengthen Jesus for what lay ahead? To put it another way, Jesus needed Mary's demonstration of love just as much as Mary needed to show how much she loved Jesus. Was it her demonstration of love that enabled Jesus to wash Judas' and Peter's feet, knowing all the while that each in their own way would betray him?

But what Mary and Jesus do is perhaps a better example of what discipleship really involves than developing our own personal relationship with Jesus, important as that is? Who do we know who need, as one commentator puts it, their lives graced by the sweet fragrance of sacrificial love?

How many of us like our own bodies? We live in a culture of body shaming, the vast majority of adverts show people of whatever age looking fit and healthy, leaving the rest of us bemoaning what we perceive as the flaws in our own bodies, the parts that are creaking or not working properly. We'd all like better bodies, but Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians that our body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, so we should celebrate that our bodies, whatever their, shape, size or efficiency, are more than acceptable to God.

What I think we can learn from Mary is the importance of living and loving in the moment. In the now, rather than focusing on the abstract, on the out there. Mary is responding to what she sees in front of her

When we love what is in front of us without reservation, we are loving Jesus. Because we can be sure that whatever or whoever is right in front of us, that's where God is too.