**JOHN 12. 1-8 Ascension 7 April 2019**

Mary and Martha of Bethany were overwhelmed with gratitude that Jesus had snatched back from death their brother, Lazarus. Mary knew that news of this miracle would be a sure death sentence for Jesus. Why? Because many Jews had become believers in this now proven Messiah, this sure Son of God.

Even now, Mary could visualize the WANTED posters already up, as she could imagine the sound of the hobnails of Temple police crunching up from nearby Jerusalem to kick in her door to kill both Jesus and Lazarus. The priests wanted to destroy the evidence fully. “Let none of them be missed!”

Perhaps, when Lazarus had fallen ill before, Mary had sourced a pound of pure nard as an ointment to anoint his body for burial. Imported from the far away Himalayas, the nard had cost the equivalent of a year’s pay for a day labourer. And once the neck of the alabaster jug was broken open, the whole of the nard must be used. As Lazarus’ condition deteriorated, Martha and Mary sent a SOS to Jesus, but Lazarus died too soon. The women held off applying the expensive unguent to their brother, because surely, Jesus would hasten to revive him, his dear friend, wouldn’t he? But natural process set in too quickly to anoint their brother and he was sealed in his tomb.

Tonight, the women threw a revival party, a thankyou dinner, a celebration of life, because tonight, Lazarus stinks no more. He was partying in very good nick. Between mouthfuls, you could well imagine him saying “Martha, these devils-on-horseback and the angel’s cake are as out of this world as those I enjoyed upstairs.

The evening was in full swing, when quietly Mary knelt at Jesus’ divan. She felt that she must seize this last remaining chance to honour her Lord. She knew she would not get another. She wanted to shout, “This is Jesus, the Suffering Servant Son of God. Time after time, he has treated me as an equal, as a woman disciple. He has respected me with dignity as a woman disciple, unheard of in Israel. For a last fragrant moment, I would like to show my love for him, to cherish him, before the sewage of hatred, spewing forth from Jerusalem, carries him away forever.

Mary could see the sorry mental state Jesus was in. He was like a beast at an abattoir who could smell death. His death would be at the vile hands of the most effective killing machine in history, until the rise of National Socialism in Germany.

When once I was a George Clooney look-alike with a shock of hair, the Brylcreem ad was “A little dab’ll do ya.” In an incredible act of love’s extravagance, there was no “little dab’ll do ya” with Mary. She took the whole of the ludicrously expensive perfume, once intended for her brother, and outpoured it, perfuming Jesus’ feet, as if he was already a corpse.

Mary countered the stench of Lazarus’ tomb by filling the whole house with love’s fragrance. And, on Good Friday evening, with the Holy Shabbat closing in, Mary’s anointing was the only one that Jesus received, days before his death. Anointing was usually a bible announcement of kingship. Mary anticipated Jesus’ show trial before Pilate and his question “You are a king, then?” Mary poured herself out in love for Jesus, holding nothing back in her selfless giving, just as, days later, Jesus returned her gift, pouring himself out for her and for us on Calvary hill.

But, Mary should not have been there with oil in her hands. It would be another two thousand years before women priests anointed. Matthew described the scene: he wrote, “*Mary did a beautiful thing. Whenever the good news will be preached, what she has done will be told in memory of her.”*

Mary was not finished. She had a second shock for Jesus’ twelve jocks. Seeming to be unaware of anyone but Jesus, shamelessly, Mary did the unthinkable in Jewish society. No respectable woman ever unbound her waist-length hair except in private. As she worked the perfume into the not quite corpse, she removed her veil and used her long hair as a towel. Her in-your-face gesture lent an erotic air to the event. This gentle sensation expressed deep love. A woman’s hair was her glory, but she was wiping his feet with it. She had no regard for what the watchers standing mute thought. It was all about Jesus. Now, Mary smelled like the anointed One. She seemed to say, “I’m not afraid to show my love until death us do part.” When, on Sundays, when we leave Ascension, do we too leave with the fragrance clinging to our being of having been with Jesus?

Like Mary, individually, we all have our pound of costly perfume to share. We all have a life filled with uniquely beautiful talents, gifts and qualities. So often, we may be seized with large-hearted desire to unstopper our perfume jar by simple acts of hospitality and service, a phone call to check on an Ascension member, an emailed word of thanks for a kind deed done us, a friendly invitation to your children or grandchildren to try out Ascension Church. “The house was filled with the fragrance of perfume.” Does Ascension fill with the fragrance of true worship on Sunday mornings?

We may be seized with the wish for such an idea, but, do we let greedy con-man Judas spoil the mood? Do we pause on the verge of doing something wonderful for God and let Judas warp our minds moaning “What a waste?” The mealy-mouthed-maggot of a man, Judas, filled with the stink of stinginess, could not express love; he could only betray love. He could not stomach Mary’s wild love. Her lavish love was too disturbing for him to watch. Is it possible that our wish to break open our perfume flask to release our individual sweet-smelling aroma to perform lavish and generous devotion can be dulled and stifled by such critical stinginess, so, the impulse dies? Judas feigned care for the poor. In the end, he could not get his greedy paws on the nard, worth 300 silver pieces, so he did a death deal to betray Jesus, discounted to 30 silver pieces.

Do any of us have only a lukewarm attitude to Jesus, only a moderate respect for him? Oh, yes, let’s honour him. Let’s anoint him, but, no, not with expensive nard. Let’s not be silly and go overboard. Do we not understand Mary’s true devotion when we see it?

Perhaps Mary’s loving anointing may have tripped off in Jesus a lovely idea, for, at his last supper, Jesus washed his friends’ feet with water. He knew that Judas might crack a psycho if he used perfume. Jesus and Mary could both say “I have done this as an example for you to follow.” Will you do so?