

Sermon preached at Eaglehawk Uniting Church,

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Reading John 12:1-8

Ralph Clarke

John tells us about a controversy, or conflict, one of many in the gospels. Where there is conflict, controversy or tension between people there is often something important at stake. People are fighting for something. The Christian faith is rarely found in certainties but it often becomes clearer in the controversies between people.

Mary poured a very expensive perfume over Jesus feet. It would have taken her a year's wages to save up for the perfume. It was a very extravagant act, like last week's story of the father welcoming the prodigal son home even after many failings.

Why did Mary do this? Some onlookers might have said Jesus had smelly feet. Some see her actions as sexually suggestive. Her motive is seen by some as love and devotion for Jesus after Jesus raised her brother Lazarus from the dead. John doesn't focus on Mary's motives but Mary's action might make us wonder about our own appreciation of Jesus – how much he means to us.

Judas Iscariot says this perfume was a terrible waste when the poor need money so badly. Many of us would agree that a lot of resources are wasted in this world that could be used to change people's lives. Australians apparently spend more on pets than on food for the poor, and I suspect we still spend more on perfumes than on poverty. Huge resources can be found for war, but not for health services or education. Judas is right to be angry about waste. Perhaps Judas is the voice of those who ask things like "why spend money on a new organ when we could use the money to feed hungry people. Or, why not sell all our churches and use the money to help those who are homeless? Faced with these choices, what would you choose? New Pope Francis is following his namesake Francis of Assisi in wanting a "poor church for the poor". Remains to be seen what that means.

John chides Judas for being concerned for the poor but doing little to help even though he controls the public purse. Governments & maybe the Catholic Church can be rightly criticised for doing too little with the wealth they have. Yet there is concern in Australia for the poor. The Uniting Church is the largest provider of welfare outside the Federal government. This Congregation is collecting and sending money for Chibobo in Zambia. The evening congregation has seen a need to get more involved in justice issues. Groups of Australians are sending letters and parcels to refugees being held on Manus Is. Detention Centre in Papua NG to let them know they are not forgotten. There's some concern for the poor.

Even if Judas was a thief, there are many today who would sincerely say what he has said, that it's more important to love the poor, than to love Jesus. Mary's choice is often seen as supporting piety and Judas choice as supporting social activism. These choices are still portrayed by some as choices the church has to make - worship or social action, as if somehow the two do not belong together. The choice has never been that simple for us in the church. Sometimes we stand with Mary in utter gratitude for what Jesus has done for us. At other times we see such human need that we make sacrifices for those in need. Both are important.

Jesus sees something else in Mary's actions. He says Mary bought the perfume to anoint his body when he died. Jesus gave a new significance to Mary's action by linking it to his own death. Mary's action previews the women who come to the tomb on Easter morning to anoint the body of Jesus with oils. As at Easter, Jesus calls for devotion to turn from mourning the dead to a celebration of Jesus whose life poured out brings life and hope to the world.

We need to see that Jesus does not reject Judas concerns about the poor. He celebrates those who can go deeper than that – and enter into his own life and love, his willingness to forgive even those who hurt him, to look beyond the blindness of people who can't always see all that's going on, his acceptance of those who were outcasts in society, his desire to reconcile people to God and to each other even across cultural boundaries.

Like the bottle of perfume poured out, Jesus life - is God's gift of love. Out there, in here, there is a hunger, a hunger that a few dollars can't fix, a hunger that remains even after justice has been done, a hunger to know that at the heart of this creation there is a love, poured out for us, a love that heals our broken self esteem, a love that helps people reach out to each other and become friends instead of enemies.

The fragrance the world needs will come, not from more perfume, or even in the end from giving money to the poor. It will come as people follow Jesus and allow themselves to love and forgive, to show acceptance and concern, instead of holding grudges, being judgemental, greedy or taking advantage of each other.

As we come to Easter this year we're invited to let ourselves feel some of the deep appreciation for Jesus that Mary found, and to let our life be a bit fragrant for others. Our lives can help to overcome the suffocating smell of exploitation, suffering and death in the world that seems to often deny love. This Sunday in Lent is a time to ask, whether like Mary, we will be remembered for contributing to the love of Jesus in our time.