



A Sermon Preached by the Reverend Canon Mark Hocknull on Sunday 13th March 2016

Mary and the Divine Economy

We are coming to the end of our Lenten journey, and today we find ourselves right in the middle of John's gospel. The story of Mary's anointing of Jesus takes place just after Lazarus is raised from the dead. Here we have a story of contrasts. The contrast between life and death, between Mary and Judas, between generosity and selfishness. Everything revolves around an expensive bottle of perfume.

300 denarii is the equivalent of about £30, which may not sound that much to some of you, but its purchasing power would have been much higher. You would be able to buy much more for your 300 denarii than £30 will buy you today. You need to multiply by a factor of 10 or even 100 to get an idea of the real value of those 300 denarii: anywhere between £300-3,000. If we think that a denari might have been a daily wage, we might even go further and say that this perfume cost virtually a whole year's salary. The average salary in the UK is just over £26,000 so put like this Mary is being extremely extravagant and in hard times, or dare one say in times of austerity, we might have some sympathy with Judas' reaction. The money could have been used much more productively and could have helped many people.

Because we know that Mary did the right thing, because we know that Jesus commended her for her actions, we tend to identify ourselves with her. We always like to think of ourselves as the person who does the right thing so that Jesus would be proud of us. But come on now let's be a little more honest and realistic about ourselves. Any Cathedral Chapter in the land would question such a reckless use of precious resources. "She did what? That amount of money could have paid for two more choral scholars or gone a long way to repairing the library windows or any number of things." Mary is not just being extravagant, she is being reckless.

Judas asks the question I could imagine most of us asking: "Jesus, couldn't you have used these resources more effectively?" But the Christian tradition has long demonized Judas. We see him as misguided thief, the one who betrayed Jesus and sent him to the Cross. But Judas is probably a more complicated character than he appears here, as are we all. We will never know what was going on inside of Judas, and neither does the gospel writer.

But let's take the high road and give Judas the benefit of the doubt here. Let's assume for a moment that he actually cares about the poor. What stands out then is Jesus' reply to him: "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me". These words have so often been used as a theological shrug of the shoulders in the face of poverty that it is hard to imagine that they could mean anything else. It is as if Jesus had said "Poverty, right? What can you do?"

In fact, Jesus here may be alluding to Deuteronomy 15:10-11:

Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. **Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth**, I therefore command you, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land."

So Jesus words may not betray an indifference to the poor, quite the opposite in fact. At the risk of making Jesus say things he didn't really mean, I would suggest that Jesus' words really mean, something like "Look as long as the world exists there will always be disadvantaged, poor people in need of justice and help. There will always be plenty of opportunities for you to help these people and you should take every opportunity that comes your way. But just now, Mary is focused on me because I won't be with you for much longer. Yes it is important to help the poor, so learn the lesson from Mary and be extravagant or even reckless in your generosity. It will not go unnoticed or unrewarded."

Dorothy Day was an American journalist and social activist born in the late 19th century. She died in 1980. She became a Roman Catholic following a conversion experience and founded a journal and movement know as *The Catholic Worker*.

One day a donor came into the Catholic Worker and gave Day a diamond ring. Dorothy thanked her for it and put it in her pocket. Later, one of the more challenging regulars at the house come in. Dorothy took the diamond ring out of her pocket and gave it to the woman. Someone on the staff said to Dorothy, "Wouldn't it have been better, to have sold the ring, and paid that woman's rent for a year? Dorothy replied that the woman had her dignity and could do what she liked with the ring. She could sell it for rent money or take a trip to the Bahamas. Or she could enjoy wearing a diamond ring on her hand like the woman who gave it away. "Do you suppose," Dorothy asked, "that God created diamonds only for the rich?"

Mary's insight and affection are impressive. She is a prophet who grasps the gravity of moment and acts with reckless abandon. Jesus himself takes up Mary's act of footwashing in his own actions toward his disciples in the next chapter at the Last Supper. Of course we do not know where Jesus got the idea to wash his disciples' feet, but in the narrative flow of John's Gospel it appears that Mary's gift has affected him deeply. While he does not wash the disciples' feet with expensive perfume, he does take the same posture toward them that Mary had taken toward him. He has taken the extravagant hospitality she offered to him and returned it to the disciples telling them that they should in turn extend it to others who are in need of welcome.

Mary operates according to the Divine economy that cherishes the dignity of life and embodies lavish giving, and that is difficult not only for Judas but for people like us with all our responsibilities in the world and who so often end up putting a price tag on everything

Albert Einstein had a sign hanging in his university office that read: "**Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts.**" Mary's act is pure gift - without a hint of calculation. In this respect she treats Jesus as he treated others. It is interesting that word for "poor" is used only twice in John - both times by Judas. I doubt very much that Jesus used that label or thought of himself as dealing with the "poor" per se because he doesn't think in those terms. He sees human beings who bear the image of the Creator.

How can anyone put a value on that?