

Embarrassing Generosity – for body and soul

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 3 April 2022

A reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Lent 5C

Isaiah 43: 16-21; John: 12.1-8

The video of this worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/> The version below is not a transcript, but the script from which the reflector spoke, so there may be some changes of wording.

Today's Gospel reading brings the song *Bread and Roses* to my mind. This, for me, highlights two key aspects of the anointing of Jesus, and particularly, the challenges presented by two central figures, Mary and Judas. There are several other significant features. Yet the tension between Judas and Mary is pivotal. For, in the early Jesus movement, this story is revelatory of struggles of identity, of power and gender, of politics and economics, as well as faith and spirituality. All that can hardly be summed up simply in the phrase 'Bread and Roses'. Nonetheless there are undoubtedly vital feminist aspects, and the themes of 'bread and roses' – or body and soul - are highly pertinent...

Now 'Bread and Roses' is not a biblical theme as such. Rather it is a slogan for social and political change, as well as the name of an associated poem and song. Yet it expresses well the dual call to material and spiritual flourishing. Neither is sufficient in themselves. Women advocating for better lives have typically been prominent among those who understand this well. Thus the phrase 'bread and roses' came originally from a speech by the American women's suffrage activist Helen Todd, further popularised by the successful textile strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts in 1912, now often referred to as the 'Bread and Roses' strike. This paired together bread and roses, appealing for both fair wages and dignified conditions of life – economics yes, but the spirit too.

As I have said, the Judas and Mary tension in today's Gospel is more than 'Bread and Roses'. Yet it is one helpful way into re-considering Judas' awkward question about why Mary's expensive perfume was not sold and the proceeds given to the poor. For it is truly awkward, isn't it? I wonder if Judas is not the fall guy in this. Surely others, at the time, and ever since, have wanted to ask the same question. Haven't we all wanted to ask Judas' question, of expenditures we have encountered?

I nearly said we ask this question when we are confronted by seemingly excessive, and hugely demonstrative, displays of wealth. But we cannot really soften things like that. Mary's action was not seemingly excessive, nor seemingly hugely demonstrative. It was actually an extraordinarily excessive, and demonstrative, display of wealth. And it was even more shocking than that...

I've been struggling for a comparable contemporary image of how shocking Mary's action would have been. Maybe it might be like the possible occasion of the Dalai Lama being received at St Mary's Cathedral in Sydney, with mutual concerns for the homeless and impoverished in our city, and for the plight of refugees and those in custody. Then up steps one of the most gorgeous creatures from the Mardi Gras Parade, carrying bottles of the very most expensive champagne. They set off the corks, spraying the contents all over the Dalai Lama, the high altar, and everywhere in sight.

Now my guess would be that the Archbishop, and most of the assembled guests, would not be that happy. Maybe the Dalai Lama would simply giggle in his beautiful way, and, like Jesus, recognise the celebration of the deepest love, which calls for an extraordinary party. Yet wouldn't Judas' question be asked, together with the appropriateness of the person and place involved?

The story of Jesus' anointing is so challenging, that it has always been awkward for those handing it on. No one could ever forget it. Yet how could the early Church handle it? The Bible itself indicates some approaches and Christian Tradition others...

Firstly, there is significant diversity of use. For whilst each Gospel has a story of the anointing of Jesus by a woman, there is no consistency. Although Matthew and Mark's stories are much the same, it is impossible otherwise to agree on where the anointing took place, or when, or even who was the woman, or some others, involved. For Matthew and Mark, the anointing was at Simon the leper's house, but for Luke it was Simon the Pharisee's house, and for John it is Mary's own house.

Matthew and Mark, and John, in slightly different ways, link the anointing to the week of Jesus' passion. In Luke however, neither this nor the link to Jesus' burial is present. Meanwhile, who is the woman? The first three Gospels do not name her. In Luke, Judas is also not mentioned. Yet, in John's Gospel, not only is the woman identified as Mary of Bethany, but Martha and Lazarus are also included, and Judas is given more attention. Rather like the differences in the Resurrection stories, all this indicates a remarkable event certainly happened. Yet it is not something easily comprehended.

Secondly, because of this diversity, there is tidying up, in both the Gospel texts, and in later Christian Tradition. A number of hypotheses emerge. Did John add in Mary, Martha and Lazarus, who are only mentioned in the fourth gospel? Or is John's tradition one which was marginalised as the early Church developed? Did, for example, the Galilean leaders, principally the male fishermen, gradually gain greater authority than the early followers of Jesus near Jerusalem, such as the women Mary and Martha, and their even more decidedly 'queer' companion Lazarus?

Does John thus reflect the importance of the 'beloved disciple', which was later lost to sight, like the name of the anointed woman? Is Mary then the 'beloved disciple'? Or is the 'beloved disciple' Lazarus? Alternatively, is John's extraordinary 'ménage à trois' a fictional development to highlight important spiritual features of the Jesus story which would otherwise be lost? Is the house of the anointing that of Judas' father, who was also known as Simon? We will never know. Nonetheless, the nature of the texts, and such elusive questions, open up intriguing possibilities for enlarging perspectives on the early Jesus movement.

No wonder some have wanted to simplify things. Pope Gregory the Great in the 6th century even went so far as to declare that the anointing woman in every gospel was the same person, and that they were Mary Magdalene. I guess that is one way to deal with awkward women – put them all into one category and reduce their number!

Although only Luke's Gospel names the woman as 'a sinner', without actually naming the nature of her sinfulness, the Church then went on to attribute perceived sexual sin to her. This is how many developed the misleading idea that Mary Magdalene was a sex worker. Our Gospel story today is therefore a great example of how biblical texts can so easily be reduced, and misused, denying their continuing subversive potential.

For, thirdly, if we approach this Gospel story afresh, there are fascinating pointers to greater meaning for us, without resolving its questions. As always, especially in John's Gospel, it is extremely helpful to look at the particular words used, and to think metaphorically too. For example, the naming of time is always significant in John. When the story begins with the phrase '*Six days before Passover*' we should therefore recognise that this proclaims a new creation, as prophesied in the passage from Isaiah we also heard read today. Six in the Bible is always an incomplete number, associated with human fallibility.

In contrast, the seventh day denotes divine completion of creation, and Passover is the symbol of God's great liberation of God's People. Rather than simply following Church interpretations about the anointing of Jesus being about his death, perhaps we do well then to see this story as the revelation of Isaiah's prophetic 'new thing'? Mary then becomes a '*new Eve*': with Jesus, the '*new Adam*', turning the world heels over head.

When we see this story as about new creation, about new life, not just preparation for death, we see other things too. For whilst John's Gospel has no words of institution for baptism or eucharist, its language is imbued with sacramentality. It also offers us intriguing windows into what John's '*beloved community*' might have been. Mary is central to this, showing us forms of community which the later Church ignored, buried, or actively suppressed. Note well, in John's story, that Mary is the host. It is her house. Perhaps the nard was also left over from that she had bought to bury Lazarus?

Like its cost, this reflects the reality that some women contributed both wealth and leadership to the early Jesus movement. Indeed, the original Greek word used for Martha's 'service' is '*diakoneo*' (aka deaconing), which takes place at dinner, for which the original Greek word is '*deipnon*' – a word translated as 'supper' in today's story, but used for the '*Supper of the Lord*' in 1 Corinthians 11: 20. Just as the anointing woman's name was lost, did the Church then later lose this reference to women's early leadership of worship and ministry, embedded in the biblical text itself?

Do we see here fragments of alternative Jesus-inspired community? If we open ourselves to such possibilities, other things make sense, not least the anointing of Jesus' feet, rather than his head. We surely cannot ignore the sheer sensuality of the anointing. The woman kneeling and/or prostrate before Jesus, the wiping of his naked feet with her hair, the sheer intoxicating power of the oil and emotions – all these speak evocatively of relationships to the body, to power, to gender, to sex and the senses, that were quite different to the conventions of the day. No wonder the later Church had problems with this, and maybe still does in many spaces. What differences might there be for instance, if we talked as much about Jesus being the feet, or other parts of the Body of Christ, rather than simply the head?

Do we also see other rich elements of sacramentality at play? For Mary essentially washes Jesus' feet. In Luke's story, Jesus indeed defends the woman's anointing by pointing out how the host had provided no water for Jesus' feet. Again, we are pointed to the nature of the 'beloved community' - feet and other parts, not just the head. For, in John's Gospel, the foot-washing effectively takes the place of the institution of Holy Communion in the other Gospels.

Mary's anointing story is thus a kind of symbolic prelude to Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet - with a woman, a marginalised, but not an ungifted, person at its heart.

This brings us back, finally, to Judas and his question. Now the text suggests that Judas was a thief, as a way of softening the impact of the question. I wonder whether this was a later attribution. Whatever the case, we again do well to look at the particular words. For the Greek word '*pistikos*' is usually translated as 'pure', and indicates a highly expensive ointment, or nard. However it can also mean 'faithful', whilst nard was also associated with healing in the ancient world. Mary's offering can thus be interpreted as one of 'faithful healing' - not just, as it were, through bread, but through roses too. For as the song *Bread and Roses* rightly puts it:

*Hearts starve as well as bodies
Give us bread, but give us roses...*

*Yes, it is bread we fight for
But we fight for roses too*

Was Judas necessarily a 'bad' man? He was certainly caught up in his limitations, but were these political as much as anything else? For Judas reminds me of certain kinds of left-wing activists who are strong on addressing material needs, and are generally very effective organisers in that. Judas' experience with the revolutionary Zealots was therefore no doubt part of the gifts Jesus saw in him. Like some left-wing male activists however, did his blind spots include a reductionist tendency and a lack of appreciation of the wider 'spiritual' needs of people, especially when embodied in women's voices and actions?

To conclude: the Gospel, truly understood, is neither simply about bread, nor roses, but always both. Nor can it simply be reduced to particular strategies. It involves the creative outpouring of joy as well as justice; the celebrating of parties as well as dedicated politics; Mary as well as Judas. They go together, just like bread and roses.

Look again at Jesus' response. '*You will always have the poor with you*', says Jesus, '*but you do not always have me.*' At first glance, that seems a little defeatist, doesn't it? - Even a little self-concerned?

Think about it again however, metaphorically, and in terms of reading this passage sacramentally. Are the bodies of the poor and the body of Jesus to be separated? Or are they one and the same, depending on who is before us.

Jesus, we might say, was rightly anointed by Mary, for Jesus stood before her.

The poor, Judas is right, are also to be anointed, wherever they stand before us - as feet, or other parts of the body of God. Yet the heart of it all lies in the heart of God, full of extraordinary generosity for all.

Pour out oil then, and pour out money. Share bread and share roses. In doing so, the beloved community is made real, and made whole.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.