

IRRESPONSIBILITY GENEROSITY?

**Sermon preached in St Peter's Cathedral, Hamilton
by Jennifer Stuart Evensong March 22, 2009**

Close to the Passover festival, Jesus returned to Bethany, to the home of Lazarus, Mary and Martha. A dinner was served in Jesus honour. I am sure it was a joyous reunion of friends and a celebration of the new life given to Lazarus. The home would have been filled with joy and gratitude. Family and guests would have reclined at the table and would have been sharing memories, stories and hopes.

In an instance all that changed. Mary having left the table returned, carrying a jar of perfume, she knelt at Jesus feet, where she lovingly poured the perfume over his feet in an act of anointing. Anointing with oil was offered on special occasions such as weddings and the consecration of priests. This was a bold and daring act. The culture of the day didn't allow for women to touch men in public. The dinner guests would have been stunned as they watched Mary wipe Jesus' feet with her hair. All were entranced by this generous outpouring of gratitude and devotion. The fragrance of the perfume filled the house, what a difference to the stench of death that had hung over the home a short time earlier. Was this wasteful extravagance or extravagant worship?

The atmosphere of shock, and wonder was harshly interrupted by Judas, who asked, 'why wasn't this expensive perfume sold? It's worth a year's salary; it could have fed a poor family for a year. That would have been a better use than this wasteful extravagance.' Generosity is countered by greed. He wasn't concerned for the poor. Gratitude is overshadowed by critique. Judas could only imagine, what he would have done with it, what a profit he could have made! If only!

In contrast to Judas, Jesus recognizes the value of Mary's act. He knows that when a friend, in an extravagant, loving gesture bathed his feet in nard, an expensive fragrant oil, and wiped them with her hair, that the symbolic act matters; sometimes those who know the exact price of things as Judas did, don't know the true cost or value of anything.

Jesus sees that Mary's anointing is more than a gift of gratitude for Lazarus' resurrection. It is the symbolic anointing of his body with spices for his upcoming burial. This is a holy ritual she is offering her beloved friend. It is a sacred action which is priceless. The pint of perfume is worthless compared to the price Jesus will soon pay for his faith. Mary's extravagant gesture of uninhibited love is of far more value than the perfume itself.

Jesus in affirming Mary and recognizing the value of her gift, says, 'you will always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.' Yes, but what about the poor? The passage makes it clear that in our kind of world we will never be able to

solve the problem of poverty once and for all through economic reform or political action.

Illus: AIG – US government has bailed them out in billions, they then give themselves bonuses of millions!

To understand Mary's action in relation to the needs of the poor, we need an understanding of the incarnation. The Word became flesh and dwelt in this world with all its poverty, woes, sin and darkness. Jesus emptied himself, he was born in human likeness and he took on the form of a slave. Jesus said, 'Foxes have holes, and birds have nests, but I have nowhere to lay my head.' That is poverty. Mary was giving to the poor in giving to Jesus.

In turn, those of us who have responded to Christ are to become like Christ. We are to become the incarnation of God's love in the world. Our concern for the poor must be rooted in incarnational theology. That means our task is not finished when we have given away a food basket or have donated used clothing to Habitat for Humanity. It means we live our whole life with the understanding that we have been called to humble, even sacrificial service for love of God.

It was not the perfume that was the costly sacrifice in this story, the extravagant gift, was God incarnate. When we come to the cross of Christ, and realise that there are no lengths to which God will not go, no depths to which God will not stoop, no place that God is not willing to occupy no expense that God will not meet, to reconcile us to himself, then, like Mary we are compelled to worship.

Mary's gesture of love and devotion is of far more value than the perfume itself. Her gesture filled the home with fragrance, leaving the aroma of generosity and love for all present to experience. Perhaps the fragrance is symbolic of the sweetness of deeds of sacrificial loving kindness. We never know how our acts of loving extravagance and spontaneous generosity will influence others. Jesus is the perfume of grace. This fragrance of grace, would have clung to everyone in the room, even Judas. Grace is everywhere no one is beyond its reach.

Paul, the Apostle writes to the Corinthians, 'thanks be to God, who in Christ leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing Him. For we are the aroma of Christ to God, among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing'.

May the fragrance of love and generosity be the hallmark of our lives, that God's grace may flow through us to a needy world, may our lives be fruitful and may God be glorified. Amen.