



**Lent 5, Year C – March 21, 2010**

John 12:1-8

**A Homily preached by the Rev'd James Popham**

As we close in on the seminal events of our faith – the death and resurrection of Jesus, we find Jesus invited to dinner at the home of his friends, Lazarus, Martha, and Mary in Bethany. Judas Iscariot also is there, and, perhaps, a number of Jesus' followers might well have been invited. Still, it must have been a clandestine affair with a select guest list. Jesus has recently raised Lazarus from the dead and, as a result, he is a wanted man. The chief priest and the Pharisees have put the word out that anyone knowing Jesus' whereabouts should tell them where he was so they could arrest Jesus. But dinner with friends, close friends, is just where Jesus should be. In the midst of an increasingly precarious situation, this night he can relax and enjoy dinner Martha served in the company of his friends.

Then something extraordinary happens. Mary anoints Jesus' feet with a pound of perfume made of pure nard and then wipes his feet with her hair. Judas was shocked. And not just because he had his hand in the cookie jar. No doubt everyone was. Now, first of all, Jewish women wore their hair up, and Mary had taken hers down. Then she had tended Jesus' feet, a chore reserved for servants. But the real shocker was her lavishing Jesus' feet with a pound of nard – twelve ounces in the Roman system of weights and measures. Nard was expensive. A pound nard – short for spikenard – might for us today be like a gallon of Chanel No.5. It was imported from the Himalayas by camel in alabaster boxes or urns. Beyond its use as a perfume by ancient Egyptians and wealthy Roman women, nard was believed to have medicinal qualities worthy of Claratin<sup>®</sup>, cortisone, and Valium<sup>®</sup>. It was used to treat allergies, inflammation, and skin rashes, and also as a treatment for tension, stress, and insomnia – conditions that might afflicted Jesus, a marked man, as he travelled toward Jerusalem, knowing that arrest and crucifixion might await him there. So nard was like any good prescription drug today. It was expensive. As Judas protested, even then it could have been sold for 300 denarii – nearly a year's wage for a labourer. Today, what would that be? Thirty, forty, fifty thousand dollars? And if you were to find some spikenard at a local spice store today – and you probably could – you would pay around fifty dollars for a thimbleful.

What Mary did defines our notions of extravagant. Extravagant from the Latin extra – meaning outside – and vagare – meaning to wander. To go out of bounds, beyond the customary or normal limits. Mary expressed her love of Jesus Christ in a way everyone saw as way out of bounds. In a way that was extravagant. And she never hesitated. Never batted a eye. Did she care what anyone else would think? Obviously not. That she might have shocked the dinner guests did not dissuade her. She loved Jesus and was going to spare nothing in expressing her love.

We are called to love Jesus, to love God, to love God's creation just as extravagantly. To love ourselves. To love our neighbours. Extravagantly. To blow past the boundaries of cultural expectation. To pay no heed to what others might think.

What is ironic is that we live in a time and place where we so often do not even blink at extravagance in material things. We even embrace it. A recent news story reports the upswing in exotic car sales. Already in Calgary, orders have been received for 15 new Mercedes SLS AMG gull wing sports cars – at 249 thousand dollars each, plus GST. Sales of Ferraris in Calgary are up. Was it 20 or was it 35 that had been sold at only 149 thousand dollars each? Do we find this shocking? Or would we be more shocked if someone passed up that new Maserati or Lamborghini in favour of a

Hyundai or Kia – and then donated the difference to CUPPS or the Red Cross or the PWRDF?

And then there was the lovely little frame house across from the rectory we stayed in after Katrina on the Atlantic shore of New Jersey. It sold for 1.8 million dollars and was torn down immediately to make room for a multi million dollar vacation home that likely would be used for at most three months or more likely three or four weeks out of the year. Are we shocked? Or envious? Or do we even notice anymore? Does it even occur to us to wonder how many homeless families might have been housed with those millions of dollars?

That's why we need the Mary's of the world. The people, the saints, who confront us with extravagant – and, sadly, in today's world, extraordinary – acts of love. They remind us to ask ourselves: Do we live extravagantly – or love extravagantly? After all, the world will not identify us as followers of Christ by our fancy cars or fancy homes. They will know we are Christians by our love, our extravagant love. For a love like Mary's that exceeds the bounds of expectation and shocks our modern sensibilities. And yet a love demanded as the only right response to God's also extravagant love for us, a love that will be demonstrated in the shocking events of Good Friday and Easter, God's salvation of the world through Jesus Christ.

Amen.