

## Lent 5: John 12:1-8

Every family has their own quirks and traditions. In my family, birthdays are not a very big deal. Mum will usually remember to send a card “Dear Sam, Happy Birthday, Love Mum and Dad” (of course, Dad hasn’t bothered to sign it himself). Simple. To the point.

But as I got to know Lily more and more, I realised I needed to massively readjust these expectations. Birthdays are a BIG DEAL in the Ratta household. If it is a family member’s birthday, any other plans that weekend are put on hold.

The central celebration being “birthday tea”— which is beautifully crafted meal, made up of various delicious dishes. At the end of the meal, the person being celebrated will then open their cards and gifts with everyone else looking on.

It’s a brilliant way to celebrate birthdays. But I was soon made to realise that I’m apparently not very good at giving the “correct” response to receiving a gift! And what’s worse, is that now I’m aware I need to up my enthusiasm levels.

But of course, the more I try to stage-manage and measure the right amount of gratitude to display, the worse my reaction is and the more this misses the whole point!

This is an issue that Mary doesn’t seem to have. Her loving response to Jesus is so totally authentic, spontaneous, and unselfconscious, that it is actually criticised for not being *thought through enough* by Judas as he watches on.

Anointing Jesus’ feet with this perfume worth three-hundred denarii, the yearly wage of labourer— so perhaps around £20,000 in our context, we might think Judas has a point! What a waste— how much more could be done with that kind of money! Used up all in one go, and not even used on the whole of his body— just Jesus’ dirty, dusty feet. Poor stewardship or perhaps “financial mismanagement” in today’s language, it’s hard to imagine that we wouldn’t be joining in with Judas’ assessment if this happened before our own eyes. Moreover, the use of her hair would have certainly raised an eyebrow, then as it would now.

But Mary is not concerned about any of that, precisely because she is authentically and unconsciously responding to Jesus’ love. Not overly-conscious of how this looks to those watching on that it inhibits her pouring

out her gratitude, nor that her action is a display of effusive piety. Mary is simply reflecting back to Jesus the lavish, intimate, and unguarded love that she has received from him.

All of this is too much for Judas, who responds by justifying himself, to point out the failure in Mary's response— perhaps because he feels inadequate in his own.

But in pointing to the waste of these resources, he betrays the fact that he has not grasped that Jesus' love obliterates our usual metrics of efficiency and scarcity. God's love and grace appears reckless and wasteful for us who are used to lack and shortage. But there is no waste in the economy of God.

In Jesus' response, he is not saying the poor aren't important. His life and his teaching show this can't be what is meant. (His response alludes to Deuteronomy...) Rather, he's saying to Judas, "you have plenty of opportunity to practice this lavish love among the poor and needy! And so you should!" "But do not let this take away from Mary's response, who recognises that I'm inviting you into a love that cannot be measured or calculated."

We know love cannot be quantified. I cannot at the end of each year add-up my bank transactions, show Lily a pie chart, and tell her how much I love her based on the gifts I've given her. On this pie chart, takeaways are probably her biggest competition...

Likewise, even if I accurately recorded every minute I spent with my friends, it wouldn't communicate my love for them.

Love is immeasurable. And Mary grasps this more than Judas.

But, of course, although time and money can never encapsulate or measure the entirety of our love, how we spend them does offer an indicator. Because even though it can't be measured, love makes itself known in visible expression. Just as we can smell incense or a fragrance, even if we cannot see it, so too with love: you cannot touch it or see it, but you can see its impact.

Again, Mary grasps this more than Judas. Because here we see the *impact* of God's love in Mary's life. Mary risks making God's love real. Mary risks expressing and living in the unrestrained abandonment of God's love. Judas wants to keep it managed and under-controlled, reserved to be given out on his terms to the abstract recipient and imagined beneficiary.

But in Mary's love made visible, Jesus sees this act as preparation for the "day of his burial." And so we are pointed to the culmination of God's love made visible to us, we are pointed to the cross. In Mary's act, John wants us to notice the bizarre paradox that the cross, Jesus' death, carries the smell of a sweet aroma that invites everyone to come to him. The undefended, unguarded God—who pours his life out as a gift, so that all might have life in him.

The cross, outside the city and outside the Temple religious practices. Here we see God's grace is not scrupulously handed out in measured morsels, but is poured out abundantly. God's ultimate declaration that the depths of his love and grace cannot be found.

Here God shows us lavish, unguarded love, and calls us to love likewise.

In Mary's abandoned action, we are given a timely reminder in Lent that *discipline* is not the chief characteristic of being a *disciple*. But rather, love.

Jesus invites us to live "life to the full"—where the sweet aroma of God's presence fills the house. Not sharing God's love in measured and calculated drips and drabs. Rather we are to pour out God's love in hopeful, almost naïve, trust that we can never exhaust God's replenishment of love in us.

So, this Lent, Easter, and evermore, may we, like Mary, be people who carry the aroma of God's fragrant and abundant love.

Amen.