

I used to think that my hair and my feet were two of my more attractive features. See what's happened to my flowing blond locks, so you probably wouldn't want to imagine what's happened to my feet.

Indeed our younger granddaughter declared some time back that she thought I might die soon as my feet are very scratchy.

Hair and Feet feature prominently in today's Gospel reading.

As always, John is very precise in locating the action he is describing in his Gospel. It is in Bethany- a village just outside Jerusalem- at a dinner party, in the home of Lazarus ( raised to life by Jesus just 6 days previously), and in the company of Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha.

We know from the cultural mores of the day that for a woman to let down her hair in the presence of others was , at best, inappropriate and more likely scandalous. The story itself contains a reference to the extraordinary lavish nature of the gesture- a pound of nard- a perfumed balm from India, the fragrance of which filled the whole house, and the cost of which was equivalent to a year's wages for an agricultural worker. Lavish with a capital L.

But where does this take us, on Passion Sunday, as we enter the last days, the end time of Jesus ministry, as the lifestyle and teaching and actions of this Jesus of Nazareth propel him towards inevitable confrontation and the increasing likelihood of him being disposed of.

This gesture of Mary- pouring out the expensive perfume on Jesus' feet? Does it pre-figure the anointing that will happen when he dies and Nicodemus and Joseph of Aramathea take their spices as they lay him in the tomb? Or does it perhaps inspire Jesus to undertake the foot-washing of his disciples on Maundy Thursday, this equally outrageous gesture of service and care? And why hadn't Mary and Martha used their costly ointment to anoint their own brother Lazarus for burial, just the week before? We don't know.

And in a real sense that's the point. We can't know. We can adopt the rather curmudgeonly, self-righteous attitude of Judas and the rationale that this ointment could have been sold and the money given to support the poor. Yet, Jesus doesn't stop

the action, doesn't make Mary feel, uncomfortable in her generosity. But he accepts this action.

In a faith like ours, an incarnational faith, where God opts to take flesh, to become as one of us, we need to pay attention to this very physical story.

Let's not allegorise it too much, but stick with what we know. A friend, a female friend of Jesus, goes beyond, way beyond the limits of acceptance in her offering, in terms of social norms, in terms of generosity and in terms of physicality.

And she does this, in this version of the story, without any hint of show or performance. It feels, as we read this story, that this really is her, this is Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. It gets to the kernel of who she is and her instinctive, genuine

reaction in human empathy of love for this Jesus of Nazareth.

In an incarnational faith like ours, this is a fleshed out reaction to a love which is recognised and shared. This is in so many ways, counter-cultural, for this is like the divine offering , a human offering equally generous, equally genuine, breaking through cultural and religious boundaries, using the physical to highlight and lift the veil on the immaterial, which lies beyond all human physicality, acknowledging the erotic, the sexual frisson, which is undoubtedly in this story.

This is participative faith, on Mary's part, reflecting God's self giving love, she offers her responsive love, enfolding her in the very act of redemptive creativity and acceptance. She offers what she can,

what she must, who she is. In an age of celebrity and constant re-invention of ourselves- our hair our skin, our body shape, our feet, this she offers who she is. In an age of endless remaking of ourselves- in social media, in the infinite ability to create constantly new avatars of ourselves, with all the dangers of self deception and the grooming or falsifying to others- and ourselves- which that implies, what we have in this story is surely something that speaks of the core. In an age where easy re-invention of ourselves can so often be linked to avoidance of our true selves, let's look to this very physical, very incarnational response of devotion and love.

That the word becomes flesh and dwells among us invites a response that begins in the flesh and in so

doing transports us to the heart of God, for we can only use our physicality, our flesh , to facilitate that- our physicality, our sexual identity, our bodies, our minds, our creativity, our actions, to offer in response to the divine love, a love that mirrors our true selves, without mask, without veil, without illusion or self-deception.

On Passion Sunday, we do well to remember that Mary reacts with love, expressed in generosity and physicality, with who she is, what she has, body and soul. Are we prepared to offer ourselves, who we really are, not our current screensaver, but offer who we know ourselves to be, our souls and bodies as a living sacrifice? Are we willing To join with this Jesus of Nazareth who offers his body in his

suffering, humiliation, torture and death that we  
may also know and share his risen life?

**BL**

01.04.22