



Almighty God, you are the King of Heaven
and the Creator of all.
In Jesus, you have shown yourself to be
the closest Friend of humanity and our amazing Father.
It is with joy and gratitude
that we worship you.
By your Holy Spirit,
flood the hearts of your people everywhere to overflowing
as we worship you.
Through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

Oh, the love of my Lord is the essence STF431
YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xQyEHQhnBI0>
Estelle White

Oh, the love of my Lord is the essence
Of all that I love here on earth.
All the beauty I see, he has given to me,
And his giving is gentle as silence.

Every day, every hour, every moment,
Have been blessed by the strength of his love.
At the turn of each tide, he is there at my
side,
And his touch is as gentle as silence.

There've been times when I've turned
from his presence,
And I've walked other paths, other ways,
But I've called on his name,
in the dark of my shame,
And his mercy was gentle as silence.

CONFESSION AND ASSURANCE

Let us bow in Lenten sorrow before the God of utter truth and boundless grace. *silence*

Look on your people, merciful God, as we really are.
Penetrate beyond our outward show into our true selves,
that we may find the courage of self-honesty and healthy repentance. *silence*

On the sins which we confess and those that we have not yet recognised; Lord have mercy.
On the sins that we loathe and those of which we have been too tolerant; Christ have mercy.
On the basis of our profound needs, and not on our preferences and conditions; Lord have mercy. *silence*

Merciful God, saving Friend, by the costly grace
of your crucified Son save us from
the evil which has corrupted our lives.
Forgive our sins
and set us free from their hold on our days.
Renew the well-springs of our faith and love,
and prepare us to surmount the pressures
and temptations that are yet to come.
Through Christ Jesus our unfailing Saviour. Amen.

At morning, noon, and sunset, God is available to those who desire the healing grace of Christ Jesus. God's mercy falls freely like sunshine and rain. Let us stand in the open, look up and be blessed. The God of all is so willing, so amazingly willing.

Thanks be to God!

Scripture - John 12.1-8

Let us pray:

Giver of the most expensive gift of all,
help us to learn from you.
May we who are so adept at catering for our own wants,
make ourselves more vulnerable to the needs of others.
Let us live unselfishly and more sensitively,
that we may spread love's fragrance
wherever the odour of cynicism and despair
hangs in the air.
Through Jesus Christ, our Saviour. Amen.

Sermon

If you had to use one word which sums up today's gospel passage it would have to be the word 'extravagance', but what we almost certainly do not catch sight of is the number of extravagances contained in this short passage. The main reason is because the words come to us from a world it is not easy to imagine. The writer of John's Gospel, though, would have utterly shocked his first audiences when they heard the words of this scene read to them in their small Christian communities. I hope – over the course of the next few minutes – you will better be able to feel something of that shock yourself.

Jesus is about to have a meal with Lazarus and Martha and a gang of friends. Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, takes a very significant amount of exquisite perfume and pours it over Jesus' feet. Meanwhile, lurking in the background is Judas Iscariot and he's clearly got a better sense of the market value of Mary's perfume than anyone else. Judas estimates (according to several English translations of the Bible) it is worth 300 denarii. 300 denarii is about the equivalent of one year's pay. The current average annual salary in the UK is well in excess of £30,000. So, Mary was pouring out the equivalent of £30,000 worth of perfume. No wonder Judas protests. The voice of Judas is the voice of so many people like us. It is an outrageous sum of money. Try to imagine – better still, try to feel – the jaw-dropping scene in the room. Imagine and feel the sheer mesmerizing fascination of seeing £30,000 worth of perfume being poured out. Where on earth did Mary get the money to buy such a large quantity of perfume?

And then, something even more shocking happens. It is so shocking; people almost do not know where to look. Mary is kneeling at and touching Jesus' feet. Let me try to help you feel how utterly shocking was this behaviour of Mary. Imagine the scene where you are at a coffee morning with some of your friends and several of you notice that one of your male friends has his hand up the skirt of your friend and is massaging her upper inner thigh. That is how shocking this scene is! It is a disgraceful public performance. It is an unbelievable waste of money. No wonder Judas is indignant. Ignoring the shocking nature of Mary's behaviour, Judas protests: "Why

was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" Whatever his personal motives, you miss the force of the story unless you recognize that Judas has a very important point. Also, it's not just that this is a lot of money, and it could benefit a lot of people, the Jerusalem temple, as well as being the key place where Jews could find their sins forgiven, was also the center of a bureaucracy which regularly managed welfare on behalf of the poor. So, Judas isn't just being mean, or greedy. He is protesting, "We have a system for managing welfare. This woman's behaviour has just driven a coach and horses through it, and in a disgraceful, profligate, and insulting manner. What on earth does she think she is doing? And what on earth do you think you are doing, Jesus, by letting her?" Judas is speaking the voice of common sense, the voice of decency, the voice of public order. Don't waste precious money and resources. Don't step too close to the boundaries of proper relations between the genders. Don't bypass the very carefully thought-out systems for providing welfare benefits for the poor. Who among us would really disagree with Judas? He has all the vocabulary that makes our lives function: stewardship, policies and procedures, by-laws, strategic plans. Through this incident, though, John the gospel writer is also pointing out how it is that Judas is not seeing the most important thing staring him in the face. He can't see the one thing that Mary alone can see: Jesus is going to die – very soon. In fact, apart from Mary, no one else is seeing it either.

So, what might John the gospel writer be saying to us through his presentation of this incident? I wonder if you've ever been in a group - or in a relationship - where everyone else is so preoccupied, so taken up with themselves or the usual way of doing things that you felt like taking all your clothes off and screaming at the top of your voice and doing something really crazy just to get their attention. That's pretty much what Mary does in this scene. And even when she does, all that happens is that Judas points out that she's completely out of order. But Jesus implies, "Don't you see? Mary is behaving just like me! She is demonstrating the extravagance of human love. Mary has poured out her whole self: financial, social, emotional. She has poured it all out to gain your attention by a gesture of sheer beauty. I am demonstrating the extravagance of divine love. I am pouring out my whole self - physical, spiritual, metaphysical - to gain your attention by a gesture of sheer beauty. I am the extravagance of God! And if you are taking no notice of Mary, then how much more heart-breaking it is that you are taking no notice of me."

As we prepare ourselves for the climax of Lent (Holy Week) we are confronted by two uncomfortable but very necessary questions. We could call them the Judas question and the Mary question. First, the Judas question. What is the thing you are not able or willing to see? Or to put it another way, what is it God would love to help you see? And then, the Mary question. What is the beautiful thing you are being called to do? Or to put it another way, how might you imitate the extravagance of God? When other people see your life, what do they see? In the words of Judas, do they see a criminal waste? And if they do, is that waste one that mimics Judas' meanness or Mary's extravagance? Judas, Mary, and Jesus all wasted their lives, in different ways. The gospel writer's pointed metaphor is for all of us: have you 'wasted' your life in caution, or in love? When people see the waste of your life, does it make them think like Judas, or like Jesus?

It is two weeks until Easter. It is the time we call "Passiontide". As we make early progress through this Passiontide, consider the Judas question: "What is it - with all my busyness and politeness and professionalism - I am failing to recognise? And the Mary question: "What is the beautiful thing I am being called to do - embarrassing, extravagant or crazy as it may be?" John's Gospel insists that, with all your failings

and imperfections, you are the extravagant passion of God. On this Passion Sunday take a firm hold on this: God's expensive, gorgeous, fragrant, crazy, and ultimately useless and wasteful extravagance is you. And God never regrets pouring out and wasting everything God is for you.

INTERCESSIONS:

Lord of peace, we pray for the many people who, at this time, are subject to war, terrorism, and violence of every kind.... *silence*

Rescue them from their misery and bless those who are your peacemakers in every land.

Lord of reconciliation, we pray for all whose lives have grown wild, and are alienated from their neighbours and families... *silence*

Bring them home to your grace, and bless your servants who mirror the love of Christ to them.

Lord of hope, we pray for those who feel trapped, defeated, or despairing because of events that seem out of control... *silence*

By your Spirit help them to find the way ahead, and bless the caring friends who stand with them or counsel them.

Lord of love, we pray for the many who have been betrayed by the cheap loves of this world and have become bitter. *silence*

May the love of Christ enfold them, and bless all people of goodwill who genuinely cherish their neighbours.

In the stillness we offer our private prayers.... *silence*

God of this wondrous, holy Lent, may the enduring love of Jesus sharpen our awareness, deepen our compassion, strengthen our commitment and scatter all our fears. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer

Take this moment STF 513

YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TFYt0S2UFDU>

John L. Bell and Graham Maule

Take this moment, sign, and space ;
take my friends around ;
here among us make the place
where your love is found.

Take the time to call my name,
take the time to mend
who I am and what I've been,
all I've failed to tend.

Take the tiredness of my days,
take my past regret,
letting your forgiveness touch
all I can't forget.

Take the little child in me,
scared of growing old ;
help me here to find my worth
made in Christ's own mould.

Take my talents, take my skills,
take what's yet to be ;
let my life be yours, and yet,
let it still be me.

Dismissal:

Grace, mercy, and peace, from God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, will be with us all this day and forever.

Amen