

Scandalous and outrageous devotion

John 12:1-8

13 March 2016

As many of you will know, I have tremendous admiration for twelve step programmes. These enable people to deal with addictions and other issues, and thanks to them, I know many people who are leading productive and meaningful lives, whom would almost certainly otherwise now be either dead or locked up.

I consider the twelve steps can be used as a basis for a model of pastoral care in most situations. But if you have ever you have ever met people who are working these programmes, they may have said some say some strange things to you that didn't seem to make much sense. Such as, "We give away to keep".

That sounds completely absurd. How can you keep anything if you give it away? But that's how it works. To keep what they gain, they really must give it away to others. And we'll come back to just how this works in practice.

This morning's gospel reading is about Mary of Bethany anointing the feet of Jesus. I really don't think I need to say this, but just to make sure we are all on the same page, the Mary in this text is NOT Jesus' mother. She is Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, and they are friends of Jesus.

This reading describes Mary's outrageous behaviour, and outrageous is not too strong a word. In her time and culture, a woman letting down her hair in the manner she does, let alone wiping someone's feet with it, is utterly shocking. Today's equivalent of her behaviour would

probably be something like the hostess at a respectable dinner party getting drunk and taking off some of her clothes while serving her guests. Mary's behaviour really is that scandalous. It will take her a long time to live this one down.

And not only is Mary outrageous, she is extravagant. That jar of perfume she uses to anoint Jesus' feet is not cheap. It could be sold for 300 denarii.

I have a Roman denarius with me here today. One denarius was the daily rate for a manual labourer in Jesus' day. If a Jewish labourer worked every day except the Sabbath, and had no other days off, it would take exactly 50 weeks to earn 300 denarii. So Mary blows almost a year's wages for a worker in one dramatic gesture. The perfume may well be hers to do what she wants with. But it may also be jointly owned with Martha and Lazarus. It could even be the family's entire life savings. Or it least it could have been until Mary opened the bottle.

Mary's behaviour is both scandalous and it is outrageous. But I would suggest it would be better described as scandalous and outrageous devotion. If you read the story in its context, it comes just after the story of Jesus raising Lazarus, Mary's brother. This suggests Mary has good reason to be grateful to Jesus, and as we heard in the reading, the dinner is being held for him.

Not only that, today's text almost immediately precedes the description of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, which we will celebrate next Sunday: Palm Sunday. So Mary is actually preparing Jesus for his rapidly impending death, even though she probably

does not fully comprehend the implications of this yet. And in this respect, it should really be added that for God to become human, and submit to an unjust and horrific death he could have avoided had he wanted to, is also a demonstration of scandalous and outrageous devotion.

Only one person raises any objections to Mary's behaviour though, and it is not Martha or Lazarus. It is Judas. He says he is outraged about money not being spent on the poor, but the gospel writer says he is a thief, and has his own gains in mind. While some scholars suggest this detail may have been added later as part of a general darkening of Judas' character, there can be no doubt he clearly disapproves of Mary's gesture.

But whatever motive Judas has, we are still faced with a difficult anomaly. Why would Jesus object to the perfume being sold, and the money being spent on the poor? Selling one's riches to support the poor is a key gospel theme, and Jesus is an archetype of humility.

I would suggest it is because there is more than enough love and devotion to go around, because God's love and devotion are limitless. Mary makes a costly demonstration of her love, just as Jesus will soon do himself. And when we give selflessly, we can be assured our needs will be met.

On an earlier occasion, Jesus had said:

29 And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. 30 For it is the

nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. 31 Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.¹

We should be concerned with building up God's kingdom here on earth, not with own needs. And if we don't hold back in what we give, God will not hold back in looking after us.

At this stage, you might point out that Mary had Jesus in her house as a guest. So what we do we do to show such devotion? The answer is simple. We show it by the way we treat others. We are all created in God's image, but for people to see the Christ in us, we must see the Christ in them. Every person the world seems to have forgotten is a person who deserves to be loved and respected.

Showing compassion to them is a powerful demonstration that unconditional love really is available to everyone. And when we give food to the hungry, refresh the thirsty, welcome strangers, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit prisoners, we do it for the Christ.²

Which brings me back to why people who do twelve step programmes say, "We give away to keep". These programmes are practised on an ongoing basis, and this includes sharing the freedom they bring with those who seek it. When people in recovery work with others, it not only helps them with their own recovery, it helps them stay in recovery better than anything else.

As it says in the 'Big Book' of Alcoholics Anonymous, "Practical experience shows that nothing will so much insure immunity from drinking as intensive work with other alcoholics. It works when other

activities fail”.³ I have heard many people in recovery speak of times when they thought their sobriety or clean time might be under threat, and responded by helping someone else in need, and this resulted in their moment of anxiety passing.

So my message for today is that we should follow Mary’s example of scandalous and outrageous devotion, and not hold back from showing love and compassion to those that need it most, especially the last, the lost, and the least. For it is through loving others that we prove our love for God.

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<http://theword.tk>

¹ Luke 12:29-31

² Matthew 25: 34-40

³ Alcoholics Anonymous World Services Inc. (1939, 2001). Alcoholics Anonymous. 4th edition, Alcoholics Anonymous World Services Inc, New York, New York, USA, p89.