Isaiah 43: 16-21; Philippians 3: 4b-14; **John 12: 1-8**

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

We have met these characters before. Mary, Martha and their brother Lazarus are good friends of Jesus. We have seen Jesus teaching at their house in Luke’s gospel and have heard the story of Lazarus’ death and his bringing back to life by Jesus, which, like this story, is told in John’s gospel.

So here we are in Bethany, a sort of suburb of Jerusalem, where Jesus was making a stopover before going into the city for the last time. These were the people he chose to spend time with; they were not official disciples, though they called him ‘Lord’, but they were his friends – a family with whom he could be himself: a man as well as a Messiah.

It was only in the previous chapter that Jesus had performed the miracle of the raising of Lazarus. Remember, Lazarus had fallen ill and died, and, despite the urging of his sisters, Jesus had not come as quickly as he might have done. It is of this death that the shortest sentence in the entire Bible was written. Jesus wept. Then he called on Lazarus to come out of his tomb, though the sisters had reported that he had been dead four days already. Trailing his shroud and wrappings, Lazarus emerged.

All these goings-on had alerted the Temple authorities good and proper: by raising Lazarus, Jesus had become not just a bit of a thorn in their side, but a proper threat to civic peace. This could not be ignored, especially not with the Passover festival imminent, so the writing was on the wall: Jesus would have to be dealt with. His days were numbered, and he knew it.

At least for this one night, Mary, Martha and Lazarus could help him keep the world at a distance. Martha does what she always does and sets to in the kitchen, Lazarus is still recovering from his own illness and death, unaware, quite possibly, that Jesus, by coming to Bethany at all has given up his own life in order to give Lazarus his life back. Lazarus died first, but yet he will outlive Jesus.

And Mary – well Mary was the one who always sat at Jesus’ feet, a bit of a dreamer. But at some stage, she wanders off and the rest of them sit down to eat. Whereupon Mary reappears with this big clay jar in her hands. She kneels at Jesus’ feet and breaks the jar open.

At this point a whole series of things happen which are prophetic: first of all, she lets her hair down in a room full of men – something a respectable woman would never do. Then she pours this perfumed oil over Jesus’ feet. Also not done. Head, maybe – that was how kings were anointed – but the anointing of feet was an act reserved for the preparation of bodies after death. There is a suggestion that maybe this was indeed oil left over from the anointing of Lazarus’ body, but it isn’t really relevant to this story either way. And then she touches him. She rubs the oil into his feet. Another no-no; not even among close friends would it happen that a single woman touched a man. Such an intimate thing to do – we know, with Maundy Thursday approaching and the whole foot-washing thing, how very weird it feels to take part in this ritual – and yet I also know how deeply moving I find it whether I do it or have it done to me.

And finally the most bizarre of all: Mary uses her hair to wipe the oil off. One last scandalous act in a whole series of scandalous acts.

So, outrageous this whole scene undoubtedly is, but at the same time, momentous. We either focus on the action and overlook the oddness of this behaviour altogether, or, because it is so deeply moving, we accept it as her last act of love for Jesus. He knows she loves him, and he loves her too. But why this public display in front of all their friends? It is extravagant and excessive as Judas is quick to point out. Why wasn’t this stuff sold so that the proceeds could be given to the poor, he asks.

Now, we know how hot Jesus is on taking care of the poor, so his response takes us a bit by surprise: leave her alone, he says. She was keeping it for my burial. You’ll always have the poor with you, but you won’t have me for much longer. This odd reply is almost as weird as Mary’s behaviour. He is saying: just for once, let her do this thing because I am running out of time; the time is nearly here when you won’t be able to look after me.

Jesus clearly saw Mary’s act as the act of a prophet: everything about it was significant – the fact that she had the nard; the fact that it was Judas, the betrayer, who questioned it; even the fact that Lazarus’ tomb was now standing empty waiting for another death. (although, note Jesus was not buried in it). The air was… heavy with the smell of death, and here was Mary revealing to them all the truth about whose death was coming next, by anointing Jesus for burial.

It was certainly strange behaviour, but no stranger than things done by other prophets in previous times: look at Ezekiel eating the scroll as a sign that he carried God’s word inside him; or Isaiah walking round naked and without sandals. Prophets so often act outside the norms; they enact the truth that other people cannot see and are written off as just plain weird. Until the disturbing truth comes about just as they said it would.

When Mary stood there in front of Jesus with that pound of pure nard in her hand, it could have gone either way. She could have anointed his head and everyone there would have proclaimed him a king. But she did not do that. When she went towards him, she fell to her knees instead and poured the perfume on his feet, which could only mean one thing. The only people who got their feet anointed were dead people. Leave her alone, says Jesus: let her finish delivering her message.

So Mary rubs this perfume into his feet; this perfume so precious that selling it could have fed a poor family for a year. That sense of the great value of the oil gives another dimension to Mary’s prophecy: nothing about this man’s death will be economical, just as there has been nothing budget or restrained about his life either. The extravagance of God’s love has become human flesh and blood. God’s mercy knows no bounds. Is without price.

And nor will Jesus’ life be spared or held back. Like the jar of oil, it will be broken open, offered, used up. At great price. Poured out for the life of the whole world. Every last drop of it.

And as we know but most of them don’t: Jesus will gather his friends together one final time – most of the people who have just witnessed what Mary has done for her Lord – and he will strip, tie a towel around his waist and wash the feet of his disciples. And he will give them a new commandment: that they love one another as he has loved them. No less will do.

And at least one of them will argue that he shouldn’t be washing their feet, and most of them, we hope, will suddenly remember Mary leaning over his feet as she has just done – Mary, the one who knew without being told. The one who enacted that new commandment before he had even voiced it.

And underneath it all is the feeling that, no matter how bad it gets, they will come through; that no matter how much they – we – need, there will be enough to go round; because no matter how much we give, God always has more. Thanks be to God.

**Amen**.