Sermon for Lent 5 Passion Sunday 3rd April 2022

by The Rev’d Emma Phillips

John 12 verses 1 to 8

I wonder who you have the most sympathy for in our Gospel narrative? Is it with Mary, in her grand and impulsive gesture, pouring out what is in affect her life’s savings all over Jesus’ feet – a one off act of extravagant generosity? She’s recklessly used up her nest egg, her financial security, all to respond to this amazing man. Jesus has honoured her home with his friendship, accepted her alongside his male disciples to receive his teaching, and most powerfully, brought back her brother from the dead. He is the whole centre of her life, and she has no better way of showing him.

But put aside for a moment your distrust of Judas – maybe you can identify with his horror at Mary’s waste of precious resources?  Maybe you feel it’s the equivalent of a church spending lots of money for a new stained-glass window, when there are refugees to support? You may be someone who shies away from showy emotional gestures like Mary has just made – could she not have been more restrained? You may well feel that the whole gesture has not been thought out carefully enough. A more sensible approach might have been to  save the ointment until it was really needed? All of these options are perfectly reasonable.

But Jesus comes down firmly on Mary’s side. He sees her actions as prophetic, accepts her identification of him as the suffering servant rather than the triumphant king. He receives her love for what it is, without denying the needs of the poor. I wonder how easily we can accept wild generosity, extravagantly displayed love? Are we challenged by people who love God so wholeheartedly that it  guides their emotions as well as their thoughts?

This is a story that prompts generosity, that encourages us to step out of the carefully considered approach of Judas and stop counting the cost. This is a story about spending the rainy-day money, not because there is a hole in the roof, but because God is wonderful and amazing! Can we allow ourselves to catch a glimpse of Mary’s love, and be inspired by it?

In today’s world it is hard to be generous. Covid has made us wary of others, the cost of fuel has made us anxious about money, and the war in Ukraine makes us fear for the future. We are sorely tempted to grab what’s ours and hang on tight. Where we can, we save money rather than give it away, and we hope that we will have enough to deal with that emergency that is surely threatening – if it has not already hit.

But God tells us that he will provide for us – and if the beauty of creation is anything to go by, he will provide in abundance. ‘Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear.’ Jesus tells us. ‘Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?’

You know, no matter how much a person gathers up, how rich they become, they will never get everything that they want. There will always be something more to yearn after. Everyone experiences loss, sickness and disappointment. Everyone gets old and dies. We can spend our whole lives chasing after the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, and never stop to consider just what it is that we do have, precious gifts that do not run out and have no price. Love, hope, faith. Beauty and joy. The sheer abundance of life, even in the most unpromising places.

We can live with a culture of scarcity – or we can believe that God truly does provide for us, indeed bless us, with abundance. We can release that kernel of worry into God’s hands, and enjoy life in all its fullness, just as he promises us. And when we do that, we become part of God’s transformation of our world. We are able to share instead of hoard, to co-operate instead of compete, to trust instead of fear.

Now if that feels like airy fairy dreaming, consider this: we hang onto what we have because we want to be self-sufficient. We want to be able to provide for ourselves and our loved ones all by ourselves, without needing anyone else. But that is completely impossible! ‘No man is an island, entire of itself’ said John Donne 400 years ago. ‘Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main’. We totally depend on each other, and what we own cannot change that. We only have to go to the supermarket to see just how many people we depend on just to think about our food – all those who grow it, process it, transport it and sell it to get it to us. We live in a connected, relational world. Mary and Jesus challenge us to live in a way that is trusting and generous, open hearted and ready to share.

Generosity is not just a quality we can look up to or aspire to. It, like any other virtue, is something we need to practice. There is no shame in having a good hard look at our own base level and acknowledging to ourselves where we are reluctant to share, where we hang onto our wealth or possessions through fear, or even just through habit. But once we have accepted before God that we have more than we need, we can start letting go. Maybe you don’t have Mary’s spontaneous spirit, but you can choose a new practice to stretch your heart, to push your boundaries just that little bit further.

So here are some possible actions, and I’m sure that you can think of more. You might get in the habit of always buying something for the food bank every time you go to the supermarket, or you might increase your regular giving to the church or to a charity by just a small amount. Did you know that you can give £3 to the Ark, the Shrewsbury charity for the homeless, just by tapping your bank card on the donation machine on Pride Hill in town? Maybe you could make a point of doing that every time you go in, as a way of giving thanks for the roof over your head. You could offer an hour or two of your time as a volunteer. You could ring an elderly relative on a regular basis. You could deliberately make time to listen to a lonely person, not just once but each week. You could cultivate a regular habit of going through your clothes and giving away the ones your don’t often wear. You could choose a new thing to recycle, like batteries or plastic bags, as a way of giving thanks for our beautiful world. Each of us is able to focus on just one of these things that challenges or resonates, one new habit that we can adopt.

God is not asking us to overcommit, either financially or emotionally, but to grow in generosity, and as we do, to learn to trust him more. The focus of Mary’s giving was Jesus – our generosity is also a response to God’s amazing provision for us. When we allow him to fill us with his love, we find that it overflows to bless others.

I’d like to end with a meditation from the course on the beatitudes that I was going to lead as a Lent Group – only I realised that I wasn’t well enough. Which is very much to the point, as God calls us into generosity but not into exhaustion or poverty! I will come back to lead the course when the time is right.

Let’s pause in a moment’s silence to invite God into our thoughts and hearts. You might like to close your eyes, make yourself comfortable, feet flat on the floor, be aware of your breathing.

Open your hands in front of you, and ask yourself: where in your life do you feel that you don’t have enough, or are not enough?

Now close your hands.

When we come into awareness of not having enough, our first instinct is to close our hands. To grasp at whatever we can find. To hold onto what we have and who we are, and not to share it. We see this all around us, in our world. And it’s the cause of incredible inequality, competition, grabbing and greed, materialism and the worship of wealth, a mentality of more, bigger, better. It breeds anxiety, fear, even desperation.

How have you closed your hands? What are you holding onto? How does it feel to live this way?

That’s a posture of scarcity. But Jesus invites us into a way of trust. You don’t have enough on your own. Independence is what makes us feel we live in scarcity. But we live in a world of dependence and connectedness. We didn’t make it ourselves and we don’t have to make it on our own. We are invited to live in the abundance of a good Creator. We are invited to open our hands, to live in gratitude, satisfaction and generosity. To share what we have with one another, and to see where that takes us.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

So today we own our poverty. We celebrate the reality of abundance. We walk in the way of trust and we live with open hands.

Amen.