

2025-05-06 ... 10am Communion Service Sermon ... Revd Pippa White

John 12: 1 – 8

If we look at the little introduction to our gospel reading this week... I think it could only be a man who, taking the gospel reading which is an incredibly tender and heartbreakingly moment between Mary and Jesus, at the home of Martha and Mary, to not mention the women at all in our little introduction to the readings, and talk only about men.

The patriarchy, eat your heart out.

Martha and Mary are characters, are women, who repeatedly pop up throughout the gospels.

We have them when Jesus visits Martha and Mary, where Martha is buzzing around the house, serving all the guests and doing all the practical bits and asks Jesus ***'do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?'***, while Mary sits at Jesus' feet to listen.

We have them again when Lazarus, their brother, dies. The sisters sent Jesus a message, and we are told that while ***'Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus'*** he lets Lazarus die, so that he might be resurrected.

So when we come to our scene in the gospels today, featuring Mary and Martha again, we know that they are no strangers to Jesus. In fact, we know that there is love between them. By the sounds of it, they're all very close.

I think it's important that we remember this scene is one between very close friends, not just some random woman wandering in.

Because the scene, the action, of someone anointing someone else, is quite alien to us today. I don't know what you all get up to in your spare time, but I'm guessing not many of you have anointed, or have been anointed...?

I stand here, as someone who has been anointed, when I became a priest, and someone who anoints others, usually at a baptism. And I'm going to tell you all... it's a bit weird.

There is something oddly personal about it. Quite intimate.

We, as modern westerners, don't touch each other a lot. We usually save touch for friends and family, although lots of us shake hands at the peace. And it's understandable - for months and years during COVID we were all told we must not touch each other, lest we transmit disease. People are often wary of touching others in this day and age, in case it's misunderstood, or misconstrued.

But when you anoint someone, it's very personal. First of all, you have to get close enough to them to touch them, so you're already in their personal space. Then, obviously, you'll be looking at them, and touching them.

And I remember when bishop Sarah anointed me at my priesting, I was absolutely mortified because it was a roasting hot day in the summer, and I had to be dressed in cassock, surplus, and stole, and I was sweating. We were all sweating. I mean, you could feel the sweat running down your back during the service level.

So as the bishop was working her way around the deacons to anoint, I kept trying to wipe the sweat off my hands because otherwise it was going to feel disgusting for her, but as soon as I wiped them, the sweat just kept coming back. So when she did anoint my hands, they were just sodden, and I was so embarrassed at the time. But I think that's such an important point of being touched by someone else - you don't get a pretence, you don't get to hide anything, because how you are in that moment, is how you are in that moment.

So when Mary anoints Jesus, she is anointing him as he is, in that moment. He doesn't have time to trim his toenails, to make sure there's no fluff or grit between his toes... he is anointed, just as he is, in that moment. And we see this moment, as Mary being the one, who really understands what's about to

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happen next. She is anointing Jesus, because in that time, in that culture, they would anoint the dead bodies ready for burial.

Mary, in that moment, is a prophet foretelling the Messiah's death.

And here we hit a problem. Because we know this story so well, because we've heard it so many times, we know Jesus is going to be alright.

We read this, thinking, yeah but he'll rise again. We know that death has lost its sting, so this passage, this story, has lost its sting.

And I think our problem sometimes, is that during lent, when Jesus is out in the wilderness being tempted by the Devil and eating and drinking nothing, and in the approach to Jerusalem, surrounded by people crying 'hosanna', and in the confrontation with Pontius Pilate when Jesus always seems to have something sassy to say... Jesus just becomes fully divine. We know he's going to be okay, so we just assume he's okay all the time.

He becomes untouchable, impenetrable, galvanised. Because we know how this story ends, with our god defeating death, we paint that back onto the run up.

But here's the thing. Jesus was fully human too. Jesus was a man, who in the garden of gethsemane would ask God the Father, ***'let this cup pass from me'*** who would cry out on the cross ***'my God my God, why have you forsaken me?'***

I know I'm terrible for imagining Jesus the man, as this really well-established bloke... in my mind's eye, he's maybe mid-forties, he's confident, he has this big following, he's some sort of powerhouse of a man.

And I have to remind myself, that Jesus, in this moment, being anointed by his friend whom he loves, is maybe three years older than I am now.

So when we have Jesus, at dinner with his friends, and this huge theological moment when Mary anoints him for his death, I wonder who it was for.

Was it for Mary, to show she knew what was about to happen?

Was it for Judas, to show that there are some things that money can't buy, like our relationship with God?

Or, I say, was it for Jesus? Was it for that man in his early thirties, who was afraid of what was going to happen next? That man who needed the comfort, and touch, and intimacy, from one of his closest friends, to carry him through what was about to happen?

My friends, as we come to the final stages of lent, can I ask you to not forget that Jesus was human.

Don't forget, as Lent soon wraps up and Holy Week begins, that, yes, we have our God at the centre of all this activity, but we also have a man.

And I don't want this to come across as an everyone-should-feel-sorry-for-Jesus moment, that I'm trying to make him seem weak or snivelling...

But doesn't it make what he did so much more remarkable? Doesn't it show how much he loved us that he was willing to go through everything he did, as a thirty-odd yearold human man, who felt fear and pain and dread just as much as the rest of us?

So my friends, as we get to the last bits of lent, please remember Jesus the man. And remember how much he loves us, that Jesus the man would do these things for us. Amen.