

Laggan and Newtonmore

Church of Scotland

Rev. Catherine Buchan

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Matthew 26:1-13

1 Corinthians 13

If we had been in the room that day when oil of pure nard was poured on Jesus' feet, who would we have sympathised with? The woman? Or Judas?

We would like to see ourselves in the woman, wouldn't we? We would like to think that we would pour out our hoarded treasure generously on Jesus' feet. His feet, not even the part of him that a person would usually use perfume on, but the part which would soon be dirty all over again. We would like to think that our love for him was so selfless and self-forgetting that we would do this in a public place and not mind, not even notice the other people. I am sure you would like to identify with this woman.

We don't want to think of ourselves as Judas. Judas is never the hero in the Christian story. But of course, as we said last week, there is some of Judas in us all. And if it was sincere, his impulse to sell and give was not a wrong one. It's just that this was not the time to say it. After all, it wasn't his perfume. And the perfume was not given to Jesus to further his work, but as an offering of love.

This woman, whose name, we are told by John is Mary, has much to be thankful for. She has been allowed to sit at Jesus feet and learn from him, has been seen as a person, not relegated to the kitchen as a chattel. And yes, she is someone whom others have seen in quite a different way. Trust Jesus to be friends with an unconventional household of siblings, one of whom was a scarlet woman, and the other two are good enough not to reject her for her way of life. (Good Jews, keeping the letter of the law, might well have disassociated from Mary). She had a lot to thank Jesus for, for friendship which was scarce, for seeing her and teaching her and treating her as an equal. And her heart overflowed.

She didn't mean to move Jesus' story on. That wasn't what she set out to do. She meant only to show him her love and devotion. She meant only to give him the best thing she had. She would have had no idea that she would be remembered, or that her action would be the trigger for Judas to betray his master.

Her action was embarrassing – love often is. It was flamboyant – but love need not be. We could also have looked at the story of the widow who quietly put in her mite, giving God her all with no fuss about it.

We looked at this story on the day that we hold out Stated Annual meeting of the congregation. At the meeting the treasurer will show us how the money we give is being spent and how the budget is working out and will maybe delicately hint that we need to give more to keep things going as we would like them to be. This has probably happened at every Stated Annual Meeting you have attended. And it is true. The congregation cannot subsist on air. At least, not with buildings and a minister, not the way that we are used to subsisting.

Thing is, this story is not about keeping things normal. If it were, then Judas would be the hero of the story, with his concern for the poor, and his horror at waste. This is a story about extravagance. About extravagance being welcomed and applauded, being understood and valued. The woman who poured out her treasure was not thinking of getting the best return for her goods, not thinking about investment for the future but about this one moment in the present. And it is a story about care for the vulnerable being more important than any other return for investment. Mary was vulnerable. In social media terms she would have been the recipient of much trolling. If her gift of love were rejected it would have damaged her immeasurably. So Mary's use of her perfume was the best use – even though the poor were and are still present. It was the best use because it came from her heart and expressed her love for her friend Jesus.

You may have heard the expression “cold charity” and it is such a chilling phrase! Charity means love, love that gives abundantly, like the love of God, and if our giving to anyone or any cause is not from the heart, or is grudging in any way, then yes, cold charity it is indeed. Judas wanted to give, but not from an overflowing heart, and it is the overflowing heart which is applauded by Jesus.

We all know who is the heroine in the story, because Jesus tells us. He tells us that Mary is the one to emulate, not Judas. He won't have “one of these little ones who believe in me” made to feel small and stupid by rejecting a gesture of love, no matter how many beggars could be helped. To talk of “the poor” is to make some people into faceless crowds. Jesus does not deal with people as faceless in any way. And in this time, at this dinner in the house of Simon the Leper, the face that was before him was the face of a woman who had just given him her all. There is no way that Jesus is ever going to reject any offering of love, however unconventional. To do so would be to reject the love and the person behind it. Jesus' presence had made Mary generous.

We could think too of the story of Zacchaeus. The man who counted every penny, who loved his money and did not care how he came by it; and who, when he met Jesus gained a whole new way of looking at his life and the things he had. After

being called down from his tree, Zacchaeus goes with Jesus into his house as a grasping individual, and then comes out prepared not just to set his misdeeds right, but to pay back twice, no, let's make it more, he thinks, four times as much as he has cheated people! Never mind if he is reduced to the level of the ordinary man – he will have a glorious moment of giving, not for return or just for strict justice, but giving out of the joy of the moment.

At this point the treasurer may be getting worried. So may the financial trustees of the congregation, which are the Kirk Session (and me). Because on one level a church is a business. And we know about businesses: they don't like things to be radically different, and they don't deal well with changes or uncertainty. And if you want to keep your buildings, then we do need the money to maintain and upgrade them. And we do need the money to pay for electricity for heat and light.

But what are we doing in these buildings of ours? Are we being church or just a business with religious overtones? May I suggest that if we want to keep up the outward appearances which people associate with church – buildings and minister being the most obvious ones, then we should be using these resources to be church in the fullest possible sense. We should be using whatever our riches are, our assets, you might say, to pour out our love for Jesus and so for others.

We should be church by worshipping God with all our hearts and souls, not worrying about whether or not things are done as we find comfortable, but about how much of our time and attention and love we can show to God in worship.

We should be church by loving one another, not just for an hour on a Sunday, but every day in all situations. Sometimes that is easy, but sometimes, especially when we disagree about things which don't seem to us to belong to the sphere of our faith, it can be quite hard.

We should be church by reaching out in love to others. Reaching out with practical help and reaching out with the good news of Jesus. People need both, and they want both. The people who are most in need for practical necessities are often those who also most need to know that God loves them and has shown it by sending his Son.

And this means being flexible as well. This week we have seen the precautions for Coronavirus growing stronger. What if we find our community in lock down? How will we be able to help those for whom that will mean isolation and possibly want? Things to think about.

We should be church by holding on to the eternal truths of God, and seeking ways to express them that are in tune with this time and place we live in. And I am not saying that we are not doing these things – I think we are or are trying to. But if we are caught up in love for God, as was Mary, then we will go on and on.

We don't want to be Judas, but maybe we sometimes are. Maybe as a church we sometimes are, always looking to get the best use of our money and assets, which is not wrong, but not appreciating or even noticing when someone might feel hurt by what we say or do. And not allowing our emotions to be part of our following. There has always been a battle between heads and hearts in the church and in life. Some traditions seem to favour one over another, and our tradition is definitely that of the cool head.

Jesus had a place for both the cool heads and the warm hearts. He was able to balance both within himself: as he ate at the home of the leper, he was showing heart, and deliberately enacting his own teaching. And as he accepted the tribute of scented oil, he was showing grace to someone who had known little grace in her life and had her own way of giving thanks. But all this time he was working his way to Jerusalem, completing the plan he had devised with cool intelligence and taken on long since, to come to the city and die there.

So as we meet today to worship God and then as we meet to look at how the business of this congregation is managed, let us not make too much distinction between one and the other. But let us do all we do, to the best of our ability, by the grace of God, so that we may serve Christ and serve others with hearts overflowing with love and generosity. Amen