

Extravagant love

I was once at a church council meeting – not at this church, and not even in this denomination – where the minister brought a concern to the meeting, and the opportunity was for the council to contribute financially to address the need. The treasurer was asked if the council could afford it – and yes, the money was there, and the minister then asked the councillors in turn what they thought.

And I watched as each councillor in turn said something like “Yes, that’s a good idea, we should do that”. People nodded all the way around the table, until the last person had his chance to comment, and he said “Yes, that’s a good idea, but what about...” and he listed other things that the money could be spent on. They were good things, but they were perhaps not as urgent as the concern the minister had brought to the council, but they were sensible things, they were what a responsible church council would do.

Then I watched as each councillor who had agreed, one by one, changed their mind. To the minister’s disappointment, the concern was rejected, and the meeting moved on to the other business of the evening.

While we should always be responsible stewards of what we have, while we should always be sensible in what we do, I think often the “but what about?” question can stop us from doing good.

There are children in this country living in poverty... we should help them!

But what about all the children in Africa living in poverty, they’re far worse off? We should help them!

But what about the children of Gaza whose homes have been destroyed? We should help them!

But what about the children taken into Gaza as hostages? We should help them.

But what about the children of Myanmar, who have lost parents and homes in the earthquake? We should help them!

And so it goes, with each concern being trumped by the next, and in the end, we do nothing. Or perhaps feel guilty about what we do, because we should have done something else or done more.

The same questions play out, again and again, “But what about...?”, “Why this waste?”

We see this play out in today’s reading from John’s gospel.

Six days before the Passover [...] a dinner was given in Jesus’ honour. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. ³Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus’ feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. (John 12:1-3)

Why would you do that? Why would you pour expensive perfume on someone’s feet? If his feet did smell, perhaps washing them would be the sensible thing to do – after all, that’s what Jesus himself did in just the next chapter (John 13:3-4), when he washed his disciple’s feet.

I guess it was a nice thing for Mary to do, but what about helping Martha serve? Surely that would have been a more sensible, practical thing to do?

And what about the waste? It was expensive perfume! Jesus is important and all, but surely would want us to be economically rational about this, wouldn't he?

It's left for Judas to point this out - "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." (John 12:5)

We learn from the other gospel accounts that Judas wasn't alone in this point of view: Matthew 26:8 "When the disciples saw this, they were indignant. "Why this waste?" they asked" and Mark 13:4 "Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, "Why this waste of perfume?"". So we should be careful of attributing these thoughts only to Judas.

It wasn't just expensive; it was extravagantly expensive. The current minimum wage in Australia is \$24.10 an hour – so a year's wage is over forty-seven thousand dollars. And there Mary was, wasting it on Jesus' feet.

I have to say that at least part of me is with Judas here - Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? Or maybe, why not use just some of the perfume and sell the rest? Or use cheaper perfume? Or something? Surely, there's something better, something more sensible to be done.

And after all, we know Jesus cared about the poor! He told the rich man to go and sell all of his possessions, give the money to the poor! He told the parable about the rich man and Lazarus, and the one about the man who built bigger silos.

Surely, as Mary approached with the pint of pure nard, Jesus would stop her and say, "But what about...?"

That's what we'd do, isn't it?

Judas is the one to speak out in this account, and John tells us he speaks not of concern for the poor, but for himself – "He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it". (John 12:6)

Hopefully, our own motivations are different when we find ourselves saying "But what about...?" or "What a waste!" But we do need to ponder whether our concerns are genuinely for others... or are motivated at least in part by self-interest.

In Jesus' response to Judas, he doesn't address Judas' motives, instead he defends Mary, "Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial." (12:7) It was intended that she do this. It is right. It is appropriate that Jesus be anointed like this – because (as we can see from the scriptures) that his burial was not far away.

But what about the "But what about...?"

But what about the poor? But what about what could have been done with the money had the perfume been sold?

Jesus tells Judas – and the other disciples, and us today, "You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me."

Had the perfume been sold and the money given to the poor, there would still be poor people in need.

Modern Christians often go to the extremes on this. On the one hand, solving all the problems of the world, with churches rallying to various causes, sometimes at the expense of focusing on Jesus. And on the other hand, effectively dismissing the problems of the world, because ultimately all things will be put right by Jesus, so we don't have to worry about them.

But Jesus doesn't say, "Don't care about the poor." It's just in this instance, he tells Judas, and all of those present, that Mary is doing the right thing. She is honouring Jesus with extravagance – a fortune in perfume poured out on his feet – to anoint him for what he is going to do.

You will always have the poor among you. Yes, care about them, but not to the exclusion of all else. Yes, care about them, but know that what you do, won't be a permanent solution to the problems of the world.

If we do think we can solve all the problems of the world, then we are setting ourselves up for failure and disappointment. "But what about the other problems?" we will ask.

We will always have the poor with us, but that doesn't mean we should ignore them.

Yes, Mary could have helped Martha serve Jesus and the other guests.

Yes, Mary could have sold the perfume and helped many poor people.

Mary instead chose instead to look to Jesus. She realised it wasn't merely about being a good person or doing good deeds, but she worshipped and adored and loved Jesus; she put him before everything else.

Often when we read the scriptures, we look for instruction, "What should we do?", but the scriptures are not simply an instruction book – they're the story of God's relationship with his people. As we meditate on the scriptures, we build our knowledge and understanding of – and also our relationship with – God.

I'm sure the point of this passage isn't that we should all go out and buy expensive perfume and pour it over people's feet. The point is about worshipping, honouring and loving Jesus.

That's what Mary did, and she did it by pouring perfume on Jesus' feet and wiping his feet with her hair and fragancing the whole house. And others have done it by caring for the poor. Or by preaching the gospel. Or by translating the scriptures. Or by many other things.

The disciples were thinking about things of the world, they were fisherman and small businessman and practical people. They thought in terms of dollars and cents (and denarii), if they had have been invented back then, I'm sure Matthew, for instance, would have done a cost benefit analysis of feeding the poor verses pouring out perfume.

But Jesus doesn't call us to business-like practices or economic benefit analyses, but practically, in the modern world, as a church, we need to do those things. Sometimes we need to put a new roof on the building. We need to make sure the place is safe. We need to make sure whatever funds we have are invested wisely and securely.

Sometimes we should ask, "But what about...?" but let's not let asking that question over and over again stop us any action.

Sometimes we must do the business like and economically rational things, but we must never put those things before our faith in Jesus.

Sometimes we need to boldly step out in faith and do things for no return and no thought of benefit to ourselves. To be extravagant in our love, just like Mary was extravagant in her love for Jesus, and Jesus, in giving up his life for us was extravagant in his love.

Amen.