

**John 12:1-8**  
**Jesus anointed at Bethany**

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The average annual income for an Australian in 2009 was around \$62,000.

State by state, the highest average income was the A.C.T. at around \$70,500. Go the territories.

The state having the lowest average income was Tasmania coming in at a mere \$54,000. Those poor Taswegians.

N.S.W came in just a little over the national average.

So, how did you go?

Many of us would have found last year a real financial challenge.

In the times of Jesus, the average income for a year was around 300 denarii. A labourer back then was paid one denarius a day.

In any currency, in any year, a year's wage is a lot of money.

In today's gospel reading we witness an act of extravagant devotion. Mary anoints Jesus with fragrant oil. The oil was worth a year's wage. Imagine, a \$62,000 bottle of perfume being poured over someone's feet.

However the anointing points to something of exceedingly greater worth. And so this story calls from us a response that spares no expense. And this has to do with so much more than simply our money.

Let us pray.

Loving Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word to us today. We thank you for the examples of discipleship in this account of your Son being anointed by Mary. Father we ask you to write your word on our hearts by your Spirit today, that loved, challenged and encouraged, we might continue to become the people you call us to be. In Jesus name, Amen.

On the surface, John's account of the anointing of Jesus appears reasonably straightforward.

There is a celebratory dinner party.  
Jesus is the guest of honour.  
One of the hosts anoints Jesus with expensive perfume.  
Tensions rise when someone objects at the waste.  
Jesus challenges the objector.

However there are number of subtle features in this story that belie this apparent simplicity. And so we will see the author of John's gospel chooses and uses his words very carefully.

The first important thing to do is place the story in its context. Some time earlier Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead in this very same Bethany.

This was miraculous show of power.

It galvanised the religious leaders of the day against Jesus. Not only confirming their plan to kill Jesus, they also now set out to kill Lazarus. The fact of his being raised from the dead was causing many people to turn and follow Jesus.

So context of our story is in a time of tension.

The timing is also significant. Six days before the Passover.

This little piece of information places this whole story in the gospel context of Jesus' approaching death.

The Passover timing further increases the tension as everyone was just waiting for Jesus to show up to see what was going to happen next.

So Jesus on his way to Jerusalem, the temple, as was the Passover custom, stops at Bethany. To push the point home the text says "where Lazarus lived". He was dead - but no longer.

And so Jesus is the guest of honour at a dinner party.

All the regular Bethanyites are there - Martha, Lazarus and Mary.

Imagine the reaction from all those present when Mary anoints Jesus.

In those times you might anoint someone's head with perfume – but his feet? That's what water was for.

But then why wipe it off when it was customary to leave the ointment on.

And if you had to wipe it off why on earth use your hair? Hair normally covered for only the husband to see.

What was this woman doing? What was she suggesting by doing it?

I can imagine the eyes of the disciples rolling as a certain feeling of embarrassment flowed through the gathering.

I can imagine Martha, blood boiling and muttering under her breath "that sister of mine she's done it again".

And then the pure nard. So expensive. But what a beautiful fragrance. So strong, the perfume quickly fills the entire house.

Then Judas says perhaps what everyone was thinking.

He smells the fragrance, sees what is going on and can't help himself.  
"What are you doing? Such waste! We could have sold that and feed the poor."

Now at this point in the story the editor jumps in to clarify something.

Although what Judas was saying was right, the expensive nard could be sold to raise money for the poor, his motivation was way off.

His primary focus was his greed. With a year's wages in the money bag he could look after the poor - and himself thank you very much and quite nicely to.

Then in John's account, Jesus speaks up for the first time.

Leave her alone. Leave her alone.

This is clearly a pointed rebuff by Jesus to Judas for his attack on Mary.

So in part we see this story is about the tussle between Mary and Judas.

Jesus makes the connections for us.

Mary had indeed been keeping the nard but probably unaware of why.

Jesus unveils the fact that it was for the anointing of his own body in preparation for his imminent death that Mary had unwittingly been keeping the perfumed nard.

Then Jesus addresses Judas' rightful though badly motivated outburst on behalf of the poor.

The poor you will always have, not so with me however.

So now Jesus points out that the tussle between Mary and Judas is a tussle over priorities.

It is right to care for the poor as Deut 15:11 reminds us.

And there would be plenty of opportunity to do that.

Indeed the town name Bethany literally means "House of the poor"

However what was about to happen in the life of Jesus was by far and away more important.

So Mary's act of extravagant devotion was more right.

So what was about to happen in the life of Jesus?

Well, that the sweet fragrance of the perfume filled the house and that Lazarus was present causes us to remember Martha's earlier concern about the stench of death at the tomb of Lazarus.

You could say death was in the air.

Similarly, in response to Lazarus' raising, the Pharisees resolve to kill Jesus reinforces the theme of Jesus imminent death.

The whole story is shot through with allusions to Jesus' death.

And we know that is what happens. The Lord Jesus Christ did die, giving his life as a ransom for many, so that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.

Jesus died me and for you.

Jesus clearly ties Marys' extravagant act of devotion to his imminent death by speaking of his burial anointing. So this was a prophetic act on Mary's behalf.

Less obvious in this story however are the allusions to the last supper.

The writer of John's gospel chooses and uses his words very carefully.

For example the Greek word used for the "dinner", the dinner given in Jesus' honour in verse 2 of our Gospel reading is used exclusively elsewhere in John to refer to the last supper (13:2,4 21:20).

Again in verse 3, where Mary wiped Jesus' feet with her hair – the Greek verb "to wipe" is the same verb used by John to describe Jesus wiping the disciples feet at the last supper foot washing (13:5).

So we have two background themes running through this story, the last supper and Jesus' death.

In the last supper foot washing Jesus will wash his disciples' feet as an expression of his love for them, as a way of drawing them into his life with God.

He will also ask them to repeat this act of service for one another.

What Jesus will do for his disciples and will ask them to do for one another, Mary has already done for him.

In Mary then we are given a picture of the fullness of the life of discipleship.

The plain reading of this gospel account of the anointing of Jesus, this extravagant act of devotion by Mary, challenges us to be similarly devoted to Jesus.

In the final analysis we are presented with two models of discipleship, one portrayed by Mary and one portrayed by Judas.

This is one of those scenes which positively shouts to us "where are we in this picture"?

Which model of discipleship do we follow?

That of Mary – shamelessly worshipping Jesus with everything she has?

Or that of Judas – cautiously keeping up appearances but following Jesus with mixed priorities?

Trusting we are following the former, Mary's example – in what ways are we, can we, will we, show our extravagant devotion to the Lord Jesus?

The following is a true story of a young child's selfless giving.

At Christchurch Cathedral Grafton there is a small china doll that always attracts attention. It's between two bricks in the arch over the central window in the western porch. The doll was placed in the temporary west wall in 1883. When the wall was demolished for the cathedral extension in 1937, it was carefully removed, treated with preservative and placed in the new west wall where it can be seen today.

The story tells how Bella Greenaway, aged ten, and her little sister, May, three, were hurrying to meet the *First Favourite*, approaching its berth at the end of Villiers Street after a voyage from Sydney. Captain of the vessel was George Greenaway, father of the girls.

As the youngsters passed the cathedral, they met an old friend, Mr William Cranston, who had just descended his ladder for another hod full of bricks. He told the girls, when they enquired what he was doing, that he was helping build a church. This was made possible by gifts of money. Little May, the three year old, said she did not have any money, but could she give her doll? Mr Cranston accepted it and set the small child's gift of a little china doll in the moist mortar between two bricks.

In what ways do we honour God with our best?

Three year old May didn't give much, but at the same time, she gave everything she had.

The apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians puts the point of priorities powerfully.

In Philippians 3:7-9 he says "But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith".

Paul set his priority with a Christ centred focus.

What will our priority be, are we willing to serve Jesus without compromise?

Mary showed her love by anointing her Lord with precious oil.

What will the perfume of worship our be, what are we willing to sacrifice for the Lord?

The little girl showed her love by giving something that was precious to her.

What will be the doll of our devotion be, what are we willing to offer the Lord unreservedly?

And we are not talking here about quantity as much as about quality. It's not about how much, as much as about our attitudes and priorities.

How will we honour God with our best?

Well perhaps in the way we relate to neighbours and friends.  
Perhaps in how we go about doing business,  
Perhaps in our attitude toward the less fortunate and troubled people in town,  
Perhaps in how we drive,  
Perhaps in our tithe and offerings,  
Perhaps in our attitude as we come to worship,  
Perhaps in our motivation and enthusiasm for the ministry we're involved in,  
Perhaps in our willingness to share our faith in Jesus with others.

When we consider all that the Lord Jesus has done for us through the exemplary obedience of his life, the saving sacrifice of his death on the cross, and the hope full and promise filled resurrection to eternal life, and when you and I consider that Jesus would have done all that for just you or me alone, how can we respond with anything but extravagant devotion to Jesus?

Let us pray.

Almighty God our heavenly Father we thank you that through Jesus you have done everything required for us to be in relationship with you. Lord Jesus we thank you for Mary's example of discipleship in anointing you with expensive oil. Holy Spirit we ask you to anoint us in a fresh way today, even now, that as we respond in love to all you have done for us, we may do so extravagantly and without reserve, because you our Lord and God deserve nothing less.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.