

In my first congregation, Box Hill in Melbourne,  
There was a young woman who was *aide de comp* to the governor,  
And she invited me to have a personal tour  
Of the very impressive governor's residence.  
When I got there, I was faced with a closed gate and an armed guard:  
I could only get in because my name was on a list of those allowed in.  
I then had a great tour of the palatial building.  
But on my way home through Melbourne, I went past St Patrick's cathedral,  
And I noticed for the first time that there was no guard on the door,  
And that you did not need to have special connections to go in:  
The poorest and most unconnected person could enter in,  
And see great beauty, and hear great beauty:  
They could be drawn into this building paid for and built,  
By people whose faith in God had, no doubt, sometimes wavered.  
But the poorest person could benefit from this visible act of devotion.  
I'll come back to this at the end of the sermon.

OK, Let's hear from today's reading: **Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.**

So, we have Mary, Martha, Lazarus, and Jesus.  
This is happening in Bethany, a town near Jerusalem,  
And it's happening six days before Passover,  
That is, in the week before Jesus suffering and death.

In this account Mary does something extraordinary, to say the least.  
She takes a pound of perfume that one cost *one year's wages* to buy,  
And, at what we'd call a dinner party,  
As Jesus was reclining at the meal, lying propped up on his side,  
As people were accustomed to repose at dinner parties back in the day,  
She anoints Jesus' feet.  
That's extraordinary enough.  
But then she does something that would astound us if we saw it:  
She wipes his feet with her hair.

What's going on here?

We hear later in the narrative what Jesus has to say about it:

He says that what Mary did was a preparation

For his impending death and burial.

But what's the backstory here? What leads Mary up to this point?

We first hear about Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in the previous chapter,

And in today's sermon I'll take you back there

And we'll approach today's narrative understanding what has just happened.

As we do this we'll think about what it is like to be loved by Jesus;

What it's like to be disappointed by him, even heartbroken by him;

And I'll proclaim the good news that Jesus remains faithful to us,

And uses even our acts of repentance, of our saying sorry,

To bless us and those around us.

Here's what we read back at the first verse of chapter 11: **Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair;**

Note, by the way, that the narrative talks about Mary

In terms of what she has not yet done: it's saying: listen in:

You're going to hear the backstory to the dramatic anointing.

The reading goes on: **[Mary's] brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.'**

Notice that the sisters don't actually ask Jesus to *do* anything,

They simply present the situation of need to him,

Trusting that he will act in love for Lazarus,

And in love for them.

But what happens next is unexpected: **But when Jesus heard it, he said, 'This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.' Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.**

So the narrative makes clear that Jesus loves Mary, Martha, and Lazarus,

But that he has a plan through which God would be glorified.

So rather than coming immediately, he stays where he is.

Now we'll fast forward a bit, and it's enough to know

That after the delay Jesus tells his disciples that he's going down south

To Judea, where Bethany is,  
But also where has recently faced murderous opposition.  
His disciples, resigned to the fact that they are heading into danger,  
Join Jesus, and we pick up the narrative again: **When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home.**  
Even though Mary and Martha had sent Jesus the message,  
He turned up late, way too late: Lazarus is well and truly dead.  
But Jesus doesn't go straight to the home of Mary and Martha,  
He waits, as will become clearly evident soon, on the outskirts of town.

Let's think about how disappointing this would have been for the sisters.  
Jesus did not, it seems, respond to their message like a loving friend would.  
He delayed; and when he finally gets to Bethany  
He does not even go to their home: is this friendship? Does he love them?  
I think we are meant to have these questions in our minds,  
And I think we are meant to reflect on our own questions of God.  
We hear of Jesus, and we trust in him and his love for us.  
But then when we are in great need,  
Or more to the point, when people we love are in great need,  
It's as if he doesn't care: he doesn't show up,  
Instead, it seems that he callously leaves us in our grief.

Now when the sisters hear that Jesus is nearby, Martha goes out to meet him,  
And we're about to hear her give Jesus a piece of her mind.  
But Mary? She stays at home: she won't get up to see him.  
It's think it's like *she's* thinking: if he loves me, he'll come here to console me.  
But he doesn't love me: the facts speak for themselves.  
This is what *Martha* said to Jesus, **'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.'**

These words sound to me like an accusation: *why weren't you here?*  
Martha and Jesus then have an interaction,  
With Martha reaffirming her faith in Jesus and her friendship with him.

Then we hear this: **[Martha] went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, 'The Teacher is here and is calling for you.'**  
There's no indication in the narrative, by the way,

That Jesus actually called for Mary,  
And I think that the fact that Martha gives this message *privately* suggests  
That Martha is saying what she *thinks* Jesus would like her to say to Mary,  
And what Mary needs to hear:  
It's as if Martha is using her role as one who has faith in Jesus,  
And who loves her sister, to bring them together.  
At least the narrative invites this sort of reflection.

Well, what Martha says works: **[W]hen [Mary] heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him...**

Jesus had still not moved toward their home,  
He is still waiting for Mary to come to him in faith.

And the narrative goes on: **When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.'**

Again we hear these words of disappointment, of accusation.

With Martha there were then words of faith in Jesus,  
*But these are the last words that Mary says to Jesus.*

She does not appear again until today's reading.

Do you remember what then happens in the narrative about Lazarus?  
Jesus more than shows his love for Mary, for Martha, and for Lazarus:  
He comes to the tomb where Lazarus' body was laid,  
He weeps; he prays to his Father,  
And he calls Lazarus out of the tomb and back into life.

If you were Mary: if you had thought that Jesus didn't care about you,  
That he was not willing to respond to your deepest needs,  
That we was not willing even to come to you in your grief,  
What would you *now* think of Jesus?  
And what would you now think of your anger, your disappointment,  
Your heartbreak?

It seems to me that Mary would have seen how wrong she was:  
Jesus *did* love her brother Lazarus, he *did* love her sister Martha,  
And he did love *her*: she had been wrong to doubt him,  
She had been wrong to be disappointed in him.  
And when we hear about her next in the Gospels,  
She is doing this outrageous act of devotion.

That from her side has all the marks or reparation:  
I'm sorry Jesus, that I doubted to you, I *am* devoted to you.

This act of devotion fills the whole house with perfume:  
It blesses all those who are there, and even those who are not in the room  
Smell the sweetness of the fragrance.

But the narrative is not yet over: **But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.)**

Indeed, Mary's act of devotion was costly; and, especially in their context,  
There were people who were desperately poor,  
But Jesus does not reject what Mary does: he knows that this is an act of faith,  
And more than this, he knows that what she is doing even has a prophetic  
Quality to it, that goes beyond what Mary could have known: **Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'**

Jesus knows that he is going to his death, and he receives Mary's act of devotion  
As a fitting preparation for his entombment: her act of devotion  
That flowed out of her evident disappointment and doubt,  
Proclaims the good news of Christ suffering and death out of love for the world.

At the beginning of the sermon I talked about the Cathedral  
As an act of devotion, and how this God-focussed action  
Can draw in those who have nothing to offer in a worldly sense.  
It happens here at Bethlehem on a more modest scale,  
As in Lent we keep our church open to welcome people from our city,  
To share in the beauty and peace that flows from devotion.  
When God moves us from doubt and disappointment back to faith and love,  
When he moves us to acts of devotion, even the Lenten acts of devotion  
Of fasting, almsgiving, and personal prayer,  
We can trust that God will use these things for his glory,  
And for the benefit of others, even the poorest and most insignificant  
In this world, who may yet be, in God's kingdom, those whose angels  
See the face of the father.

May God keep us in faith, and in devotion to his Son,  
So that his name may be glorified among us,  
And so that we may be built up in love. In Jesus' name. Amen.