

The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume

John 12.3

If you ever read the review section that comes with the Times on Saturday you may be familiar with a regular article: 'My culture fix'. Each week a different person is interviewed about their cultural likes. One question that they are always asked is about a fantasy dinner party. "I'm having a fantasy dinner party, I'll invite..." A couple of weeks ago the interviewee was a novelist Michelle Paver, with whom, to be honest, I am not familiar but I liked her answer:

"Caravaggio, Van Gogh, Dorothy Parker and Raymond Chandler at the rowdy end of the table; E Nesbit, MR James and Anthony Trollope at the other... But the whole thing would be a nightmare and I'd cancel at the last minute."

Today in the church calendar the season of Lent moves into Passiontide. And once again we are being invited, encouraged, challenged to focus and indeed to enter into the events that culminated in the death of Jesus on the cross of Calvary and his resurrection from the dead three days later.

All four gospel writers begin their account of the passion with an account of a dinner party given in Jesus' honour at Bethany, on the day before Palm Sunday. It was to be the first of a number of meals that were to be very significant in the following week.

I am sure we can all look back to memorable meals, in which we have shared. I suspect always what has made them memorable was not in the end the food and wine, however fine they were, but our fellow guests. And no doubt too we can remember some that did prove to be nightmares.

In the dinner described by John in the gospel reading it is a fascinating group of guests. While Jesus is the guest of honour, also present is Lazarus, whom he had brought back from the dead. There are Lazarus' two sisters Mary and Martha and of the twelve Judas Iscariot.

Very early on, the atmosphere becomes uncomfortable.

Mary takes a jar of costly perfume and anoints Jesus feet, and wipes them with her hair.

In following the events of the passion, it appears that we have begun at the end of the story. Surely this should be the action of Friday evening as Jesus is anointed for burial.

To prepare a body for burial is normally the final act of love that we can offer somebody in this world. Mary does not realise the significance of what she is doing, as she pours a small fortune's worth of perfume on Jesus feet.

Yet the prospect of his death has been with Jesus from the very beginning.

I wonder if you are familiar with the painting of the Adoration of the Kings by the elder Breughel that hangs in the National Gallery?

Visit of wisemen is a favourite theme for artists – full of exotic colours and splendour. But look closely and we see that Breughel's version is very different.

The crowd surrounding Jesus and his family appear hostile.

He is not asleep on his mother's lap. He is wide awake looking at the gift and he seems to recoil. His flesh is pale for the gift that is being offered is not the gold, but the myrrh. From the time of his birth Jesus knew that he was being prepared for his death.

How do we react to this story of Mary's extravagance? If honest I find it quite embarrassing. I have considerable sympathy with Judas when he questions:

"Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?"

I suspect that he speaks for many of us. And I think John knows that so he details the dark character of Judas:

"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."

However, that doesn't answer our questions.

Judas is embarrassed by Mary's extravagant worship, as I can find myself so often by the worship of others. How easy it is to be critical. Criticism about music, forms of service, excessive enthusiasm, lack of enthusiasm. So easily with Judas we can make a big mistake: to judge Mary on the form and value of her gift rather than judging and valuing the one to whom the gift is given.

300 denarii – a year's wages for a working man, we are told. Think what Christian Aid could have done with such a sum. How many wells could be dug, tools purchased, seeds sown? Can Jesus be worth such a sum?

It is so hard to understand and appreciate other people's love and devotion to God. Here Mary offers an extravagant costly gift. For she had been given so much:

- her dead brother restored
- known forgiveness of sin and release from guilt
- the realisation of what God has done for us, expressed by Paul in our NT reading: *"I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord."*

Today we enter Passiontide – a time to discover afresh what God has done for us and for his world.

John records of this memorable but embarrassing dinner party that *"the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume"*. I love that verse. The fragrance of excessive costly love for God.

In these next two weeks may this great church be filled again with that same fragrance as we offer our gratitude and worship to God for all out of his love that he has done for us.