

Extravagant love

[Isaiah 43.16-21](#)

[Philippians 3.3-14](#)

[John 12.1-8](#)

Our readings this week offer us a surprising invitation – to recognise God’s extravagant care of us and to respond like Mary in celebratory adoration of the Incarnate One. As we journey on through Lent, this time of sacrificial reflection and decisions to live differently, this week is both refreshing, and deeply challenging. We are called to follow the Lord’s overflowing generosity and care for each of us.

Both the Gospel and the reading from Philippians 3 remind us that we are called to give our all to Jesus. Sometimes we see this self-offering in an abstract way - giving all our belief, setting our hearts towards God’s Kingdom as we deeply listen to the words of Jesus and ponder them.

Throughout this season of Lent, we have been examining our thoughts, actions and intentions in the light of Jesus’ teaching and seeing where we fall short. Understanding what we can do to change and where we can invite God into our struggles is a very life-giving process. We have been encouraged to give generously to different appeals knowing that our attachment to money can create a wall in our hearts which stops us listening to God. We do all this in order to allow the Spirit of God to bring new life, new hope, new energy into our own lives as well as into the life of the gathered community of the Church.

In Isaiah 43, the prophet reminds us that God is doing something new - the mighty Lord who made a path through the Red Sea for the Israelites to escape their slavery and the warlike Egyptians who were following them, intent on revenge; this is the Lord who will bring us through the seas of our own difficulties. Our role is to be open to the new thing that God is doing

Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

How easy it is to hold onto the former things! Even if we think we are flexible and open to change, we may find ourselves thinking something like: ‘But we’ve always done it this way!’ Or ‘This is just how I do it...’

It is very easy to go along doing the things we are comfortable with, never opening up our habits and ways of being. We deny ourselves the opportunities for personal and spiritual growth when we hold onto *the former things*. God yearns to bring about new growth in our lives - especially where we are dry and our lives are diminished by the unhelpful attitudes and actions we hold onto.

Isaiah continues

I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise

Streams in the desolate wilderness. Think for a moment about the extravagance of this image - rivers flowing in the desert. New life and new hope abound where we thought there was none. Maybe you have seen nature documentaries where flooding rain has brought teeming life to Kati Thanda/Lake Eyre. New life abounds!

Isaiah promises the exiles that the Lord is doing a new thing - they just have to open themselves to perceive and experience the new salvation of God. Even the wild animals will benefit - and be tamed so that they no longer induce fear in us but rather bring honour to God.

When we ponder this passage, it is helpful to ask ourselves which areas of our lives are parched and lifeless. Where do we need to ask for God's refreshing river to flow? What might our wild animals, our 'jackals' be? Perhaps we can think of these as the untamed habits which might be harmful, or the fears which hold us back. Or the 'ostriches'- things we might like to ignore, but really need dealing with if we are to grow, both personally and spiritually? Where might pondering on these images lead us to offer to God?

In Philippians, **Paul** identifies his pride in his past strivings and achievements before he encountered Jesus and now considers them just rubbish because of the surpassing value of knowing Jesus. His aim in life is now *to know Christ and the power of his resurrection*. He chooses to leave all that behind him and to press on because he is aware of the cost of his salvation and the extravagance of God's love as *Christ Jesus has made me his own*.

In our Gospel reading, Mary, Martha and Lazarus give a dinner for Jesus. Lazarus has everything to be thankful for when he considers his relationship with Jesus. He quite literally has received a new life - raised from the dead after he became ill and died. This meal would have cost them quite a lot of money and so much time and effort, but it afforded them a wonderful opportunity to publicly show their love and appreciation of Jesus and what he had done for them. It would have also provided a way for their friends and neighbours to meet Jesus for themselves.

Mary honours Jesus and her extravagant love for him through this almost embarrassing public display. This emphasis on celebration is quite a contrast to the exhortations of discipline and confession that usually characterise the Lenten period. But the message is clear – the journey through the desert is **a journey toward life and joy**, for it leads us to recognise, and own for ourselves, the truth that Christ brings us salvation – life in all its fullness.



Mary's gift to Jesus is over-the-top extravagant! Do you secretly find yourself agreeing that the money would be better spent on the poor? And then (how could this happen!) you realise it is Judas who said this! You probably would not want to find yourself aligning with Judas. Yet all that expensive perfumed oil wasted on Jesus' feet! It seems obscene that so much valuable perfume would be almost thrown away...and on feet!

Yet, God's love flows out to us in extravagant ways; to those who couldn't care less, as well as to those who are longing for a deeper relationship with God. To understand the value of Mary's expensive gift is to come to an appreciation of worship. We spend time with God, loving our heavenly Father, enjoying divine company as an act of worship. There are many other things on which our time could be spent. Time spent in this way may not seem to be productive- we haven't made or completed anything!

Yet in a similar manner we were happy to spend hours with our loved one when we first met. This time too may not have been spent productively if we were to measure the output in terms of material things. But if we measure it in terms of love, it starts to make more sense. For many, putting aside the old ways of being output-focused enables us to spend more time with others and with God.

Mary commits an act of love in a context of incipient cruelty. She honours Jesus with an extravagant outpouring of not just her perfume, but of herself, that fills a room with sweet fragrance. Her action is an oasis of honour in a desert of plotting and brutality. While Judas looked for an opportunity to betray Jesus, she made an opportunity to honour him as she anoints him with a soothing, fragrant ointment.

When we choose to worship, we show our love for the Lord. When we sing our hearts out, or open the deepest parts of our being to God in prayer- we are preparing the path for the 'something' new that Isaiah spoke about. Mary's action challenges us: is our faith not just of the head, but of the heart, and not just of the way of justice, or good Christian living, but also of the way of joy, celebration and appreciation? A good habit to establish is to ask of ourselves: What am I giving the Lord today as a gesture of love?

"There is only one anointing that is strong enough to meet death and that is the anointing of the Holy Spirit, the love of God. There is, then, something that is both exemplary and lasting in Mary's anointing of Jesus at Bethany. It was above all a concern to keep Christ alive in this world and to oppose the powers that aimed to silence and kill him. It was an act of faith and love." Pope Benedict