

St. Michael and All Angels

Ōtautahi Christchurch

6 April 2025

Homily

John 12:1-8 / NRSVUE

- 1 Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.
- 2 There, they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him.
- 3 Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus's feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.
- 4 But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples, the one who was about to betray him, said,
- 5 "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?"
- 6 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.
- 7 Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.
- 8 You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Prayer

Heavenly Father,
we thank you that we are in your presence
being heard and received.
So we say, “Come, Holy Spirit,”
trusting that, as we draw near to you,
you will draw near to us.

There is a ‘cost’ to following Jesus

“Mary took a pound of costly perfume, anointed Christ’s feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume” (John 12:3).

I am sure you are all aware that following Jesus has a cost. The witness of Scripture states, “If any of you wish to come after me, you are to deny yourself; take up your cross and follow me” (Luke 9:23).

There is a strange tension that begins to surface in our lives as we draw nearer to the compelling character of Christ. Firstly, as we enter into the mystery of Christianity, we often encounter a sense of liberation from the old self and old fears. We can also experience a deepening appreciation for life, one another, and creation. However, it is within this faith journey toward God that we also begin to experience fractures in our lives.

Unfortunately, the commitment to faithfully follow Jesus to the best of our abilities often results in loss. This tension can be experienced through the loss of friends, family, marriages, career opportunities, and societal status. Remembering, that a world that has rejected Jesus and his teachings is obligated to reject Christ’s followers as well (John 15:20).

In today’s gospel, we see that Mary had something of great value, but rather than keeping it for herself, she chose to honour Jesus with it. And although we are not always cognitively aware of what we may lose or feel the need to give over, increasingly, we are becoming aware that following Jesus may result in some form of personal sacrifice.

This is not to say that the fractures in our relational lives resulting from following Jesus will remain unhealed or that our sacrifices will contain a loss that we will carry forever.

But until Christ initiates the universal restoration of all things (*apokatastasis*), we will need to prepare ourselves to be ready to endure the daily challenge of taking up our cross (Acts 3:20-21).¹

Worldly ambitions

At this point, it is reasonable to think that anything worth having requires sacrifices or comes at a cost in our lives. An athlete trains day and night, often from a young age, and forgoes the usual social events with their friends. A business owner consistently wrestles with work-life balance, often to the detriment of their personal life. Politically minded people give up much of their time to talk to the press and attend functions and meetings nationwide.

Meanwhile, creative people may tuck themselves away, usually in a reclusive lifestyle, as they work to create something in the hope of gaining personal fulfilment or critical acceptance, maybe even fame.

In many ways, all areas of development and achievement come at a cost. However, what may differ is the motivation. For example, when we aim to ‘outperform’ others through acts of physical endurance, dominate a business sector by crushing competition, seek to be recognised as a ‘high-value’ person of influence, or simply look for personal fulfilment and societal recognition, we encounter a specific type of ‘sacrifice,’ one that we hope will lead to public acceptance. In contrast, Jesus tells us, “I do not seek my own glory. If I glorify myself, my glory is worth nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, the one you call your God” (John 8:50-54).

Consequently, the outcomes we encounter when following Jesus are not sacrifices that lead to being held in high regard. Instead, followers of Jesus often become subjects of social scorn and ridicule. Our Lenten journey towards Christ does not result in self-interested gains; Our journey towards Christ leads us to the cross.

¹ In theological discussions, “apokatastasis” refers to the restoration or reconciliation of all things to their intended state, whereby, ultimately, all beings are reconciled with God.

The ‘opposer’

These motifs of sacrifice and the cost of following Jesus are themes worth exploring, particularly by examining two central figures in our gospel readings. These personalities deliberately create doubt in the hearts of those prepared to count the cost of following God.

In one of our first Lenten readings from several weeks ago, we encountered the figure of the Evil One as he tempted Jesus in the wilderness. Furthermore, in today’s reading, we see that it is Judas, who asserts that Mary’s costly honouring of Jesus was an unnecessary extravagance. What’s interesting in our stories is that the Satan attempts to convince Jesus that there is no benefit in going hungry; thus, he should create some bread for himself. Next, the ‘adversary’ claims it is reasonable to desire and accept societal acclaim, asserting it is only fair for the nations of the world to admire him. Lastly, the ‘accuser’ states there is no need for Jesus to get hurt and that it is better to avoid discomfort.

Additionally, Judas asserts that Mary’s actions are reckless, as surely the needs of society should be put first before the worship of God. Essentially, both Judas and the Evil One question whether there should be a personal cost to following God. However, the Holy Scripture testifies that we should present ourselves as a “living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, for this is true and proper worship” (Romans 12:1).

Memento mori

Following on from the notion of presenting ourselves as a “living sacrifice” and Mary’s anointing of Jesus as a preparation for his death, I began to consider our Lenten journey by meditating on our gospel passage over the week. As I did, I felt a gentle prompting of the Holy Spirit. And the impression I felt that was placed in my heart was this: “How are you anointing your own body in preparation for your death?”

That provocative prompting by the Spirit led me to consider how we prepare ourselves to become a “living sacrifice.” How do we prepare ourselves to be received into the true and lasting glories of God’s kingdom?

If we choose to receive the question, “How are you anointing your own body?”

I believe that what is actually being asked is, “How are we participating in and receiving God’s divine blessing, his consecration, and his gifts of strength and regeneration for mission.”

How are we faithfully allowing the presence of the Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth? What spiritual practices and disciplines are we adopting to bring about cleansing, healing and comfort for ourselves and our communities under the realisation that when God’s Spirit is at work, that is God’s anointing and everything that occurs from the incarnation onwards derives its fullness from the Spirit and the Spirit alone.

Lastly, for Jesus, to be called the ‘anointed and chosen one’ implies that there is no separation between Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. May our Lenten journey remind us that Christ’s example of connection and intimacy with the Holy Spirit reflects God’s wish and blessing for all. This Easter—may there be no distance between ourselves and the presence of God.

In the name of the Father,
and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit

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Amen.