

JOHN 12:1-8
A MOMENT OF EXTRAVAGANCE

What do children do better than adults? Do you have any suggestions? Why are children better at doing some of these things? Are they less inhibited than adults? Adults ask: "Will I look silly? Who is watching?" we are more relaxed when with people we know very well, but still there is a reserve at times because we're not sure. If a child trips and falls, it will cry and look for help; if an adult trips and falls, as long as it is not serious, we look around to see if anyone noticed! Only if the fall is serious do we then look for help. A child will give you a hug because it wants to; adults need to know there is a reason!

Extravagance – there's a word we don't easily recognise! We know the word, just not always the emotion! We are reserved Scots who don't easily show our emotions of any kind; we'd rather keep them bottled up so that "we don't let ourselves down!" When was the last time you were extravagant? Are we talking a language you don't understand? What does being extravagant look like? Is being extravagant when we give someone a very expensive present or take someone on a very expensive treat? It tends to be about spending money, I suppose, but not always. The dictionary defines extravagant as lavish and as wasteful: there are two sides, because one person's lavish gift, to another is just a waste of money!

What inspires extravagance? Think about the people you are extravagant to: there are two groups. The first group of people to whom we might be extravagant are people we love and the deeper the love, the greater the extravagance; is that not how it is? There are some people that we would do anything for, some people for whom we might just empty the bank account because our love for them is so deep, so strong; love inspires our extravagance! The second group to whom we might be extravagant are people who have done something good and special for us; we are inspired by a sense of gratitude; we want to show our thanks by giving them something in return; they may not have done this great thing looking for reward, but we want to show our gratitude and the deeper the gift, the more extravagant we want to be!

Mary is extravagant. John sets the scene for us. It is six days before the Passover, so we're fast approaching the last days of Jesus' life. He is travelling to Jerusalem and comes to Bethany; Matthew's gospel suggests that Jesus may have spent the nights of next week in Bethany, staying with His friends while travelling the two miles up to the city during the day. He's arrived at His friends' house and dinner is being served. We have Martha serving dinner, in and out of the kitchen space, working hard as she had done before. We have Lazarus, their brother, whose story we read in chapter 11; he died and Jesus brought him back to life again; he has become famous and people come to see him and some were putting their faith in Jesus as a result. Dinner is served in Jesus' honour, with family and friends around the table, with Jesus and His disciples.

Mary gets up from the table; maybe she leaves the room; she has something she needs to do. She comes back with her most prized possession. "*Mary took...*" (John 12:3) This was expensive: "*It was...*" (John 12:5) – Judas tells us that! Her most prized possession, the most expensive thing in house, a jar of perfume and we see the cost; this is an extravagant present for her to give to anyone! She pours it on Jesus' feet – normally this kind of gift would have been poured on someone's head, but she pours it on Jesus' feet. We see something of Mary's humility in this act, the humility of a servant reminding us that in a few days' time Jesus will wash the feet of His disciples, another act of humble service. She wipes His feet with her hair: unbound hair for a woman in that culture was a sign of loose morals, but Mary doesn't care what people think of her; she only cares about Jesus.

Why does she do this? *“Leave her...” (John 12:7)* Love and gratitude? It is not hard to see these two emotions in this story. Lazarus is sitting there: Jesus brought him back to life; he would die again, but for the moment he is there with his sisters and surely Mary is grateful for what Jesus did. This is the same Mary who sat at Jesus’ feet listening, taking in everything He said; do we think that Mary’s life was shaped by what she heard Jesus say, with a sense of life in all its fullness in her heart? Does she have an idea of sins forgiven? Have Jesus’ kingdom values become important to her? Gratitude and love in her heart! Then there’s a third notion, that maybe only Jesus sees: she is preparing Him for His burial. The following day will be Palm Sunday; by Friday, Jesus will be dead and Mary anointing Him somehow captures that, evokes what is coming and Jesus commends her for her extravagance.

Lavish and wasteful. We see the wasteful side of extravagance in Judas’ reaction! A year’s wages are gone in a heartbeat! “Think of how many poor people we could have helped with all that money!” Or was that his only reason to gripe? *“He did...” (John 12:6)* John’s comment as the editor of his gospel opens a window into Judas’ soul; money was on his mind all the while and that was all he saw; “what a waste!” Perhaps this is a sign of discontent in Judas’ spirit that would lead him to betray Jesus later; his hopes for Jesus were being dashed; talk of the cross, death and burial were not what Judas had hoped for when he joined Jesus’ band of disciples. For Judas, this is a sign of that waste; it is a blind alley!

Love for Jesus, gratitude to God – these inspire our extravagance! A long time ago now, I was arranging some stewardship training for people in Caithness to help churches improve their giving and there were two men came to lead the training, Will Farrell and Willie Mackay; we were talking about the day to come and what we were going to do and the process of training they were going to deliver and how it would be used to help the churches encourage people to give more money. Willie Mackay said something like “of course, the more that people love Jesus, the more they will give!” It is as simple as that. Our giving to God of worship, time, talents, energy, money is a response of love and gratitude to God for what He has done for us. The more sense we have of how God has blessed us, the fuller and more extravagant will be our response.

The prophet Isaiah is looking to inspire the people of Israel to worship and serve the Lord in their new circumstances. How does he go about it? He does it by reminding them of what God has done for them in the past. He takes them back to the experience of the Exodus, to the day when Moses and the others crossed the Red Sea; he takes them back to this defining moment in their history as a people and says to them “remember what God has done; remember how God has blessed you; now love and serve the Lord in the days to come and proclaim His praise.” Remembering, he hopes, will evoke a spirit of love and gratitude in the people of God, so that they will commit to walk in the Lord’s ways in the days to come, in the new thing that the Lord is about to do.

In two weeks’ time, we remember the events of Easter. How do you react to Easter? It is harder than Christmas; it is a story of death and crucifixion and if we’re honest it’s a bit barbaric! The story of resurrection comes next and we’re still not quite sure what to make of that; we believe it, but... How do you react to Easter? Easter at its best does three things for us: first, the celebration of Easter helps us remember the story, the events of the cross and the resurrection, the story that should be at the heart of church life, of Christian faith, but it is easy to forget. Easter brings this story back centre stage. Secondly, the celebration of Easter each year should help us believe the story a bit more, with a little more understanding of what Jesus did, so that our faith is a little stronger, a little fuller. Thirdly, the celebration of Easter at

its best should give us a fresh sense of gratitude and love, seeing what Jesus has done for us and how He has loved us, then we are inspired to love Him more and be eternally grateful to Him for His sacrifice of Himself to be our Saviour.

Look for opportunities to give generously to other people. This is also our response to Jesus. We give Him our love and our worship, but our other response it to give generously of our time, energy, talents, money to help others. We've been thinking about smells this morning: in 2 Corinthians chapter 2, Paul talks about us being the "aroma of Christ" to the world. This is the impact of our ministry of the gospel and of grace, that as we live our lives by faith, then something of the aroma of Christ is spread in the world. Not everyone who sees and hears us will believe but some will and some will discover Jesus through our generosity. Look for opportunities to be generous to someone this week, so that by giving, loving, caring, we are showing Jesus, telling of Jesus; when we are generous to others, they will see something of Jesus in us.

Extravagance? Have you ever been extravagant in your life? The spirit of love and gratitude is inspired in us by Jesus and by what He has done for us; remember how He has loved you, in the events of Easter, on the day you came to faith, in the times in your life when He has blessed you. Remember and say "thank you" by our worship, by your giving to God, to the church, to other people; giving your love, giving your time, energy, talents, money. Remember and be glad. Mary gave the most expensive thing she had to Jesus, she poured oil on His feet, prepared Him for His burial by her lavish giving. Was it wasteful? She didn't see it that way; she would have done anything for Jesus, full of love and gratitude!