

## THE AROMA OF GRATITUDE

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Grace Church in New York  
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*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. (John 12:3)*

We Americans can't seem to get enough of the British royal family. Hardly a day goes by without the latest on whether or not Kate Middleton and Meghan Markel are actually getting along. Who knows? Also worthy of headlines this week is that Prince Charles enjoyed a "boys' night out" with his two sons, Princes William and Harry. What is more, many Americans fancy themselves to be armchair historians of the English monarchy, knowing who succeeded whom, who was Duke of Here, and who was Duchess of There.

One story of palace intrigue that I doubt you've heard concerns the great Queen Elizabeth I, who reigned from 1558 to 1603 (43 years and 4 months for those who are counting). Elizabeth was a courageous monarch. She was unafraid of her father Henry VIII. She was unafraid of her half-sister "Bloody" Mary. She was unafraid of anyone else who might have tried to kill her all in the name of reforming the church. Under her reign the British navy defeated the Spanish Armada, Shakespeare composed his many plays and sonnets, the Anglican Church emerged from the tempest of Roman Catholic and Protestant feuding, and England flourished.

For all of her courage, however, Elizabeth was apparently terrified of the royal doctors and dentists. Mind you, now, hers wasn't an altogether irrational fear, since in those days your doctor, your dentist, and your barber were probably all the same ill-trained fellow. But Elizabeth had many chronic health problems, not the least of which were her rotting teeth. One toothache was so bad that her physician declared the only way to relieve the intense pain would be to extract the tooth. Elizabeth refused. The Court Council convened and tried to persuade the Queen to agree to the tooth pulling. She still refused. Finally the Bishop of London stepped forward with an extravagantly selfless proposal to break the stalemate. The good bishop would allow the dentist to extract one of his own perfectly good teeth, just to show Her Majesty that the procedure was survivable. Only after witnessing the operation did the Queen allow the dentist to come near, and all of England breathed a sigh of relief.<sup>1</sup>

Here we are on the fifth and final Sunday in Lent, right on the brink of Palm Sunday and Holy Week. Appropriately so, today's reading from the Gospel of John describes a similar moment in the life of Jesus. According to John's chronology it was six days before the Passover, making it Saturday, the day before Jesus would enter the city of Jerusalem. Thus, Jesus was right on the brink of the first Palm Sunday. The place was Bethany, a small town just outside of the city. Jesus' good friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived there, and were hosting a dinner in his honor. John describes the swirl of activity that took place, but in my mind, the "elephant in the living room," the really big deal right before their eyes that everyone seemed to be ignoring at the moment was Lazarus. According to John, not too long before the dinner party, Lazarus had been dead – so dead that his body was decaying in his tomb. Jesus had come, wept at the tomb, and then spoke the words that called forth life from death: "Lazarus, come out." Lazarus emerged from the tomb, still wearing his grave clothes, and never spoke a word.

True to form, Lazarus never speaks a word in today's reading. He was merely "at the table" with Jesus. But his presence there is the only way that I can make sense of what John describes next. Mary, sister of Lazarus, stepped forward with an extravagant gesture. She took a vial of extremely expensive perfume, valued at 300 denarii, or approximately \$24,000 in today's money, and poured it on the feet of Jesus. Then she let down her long hair and wiped his feet. What was

she thinking? What was her motivation? As we heard, Jesus connected her action with his own death that he foresaw as sure to come at the hands of his enemies in Jerusalem. She was anointing his body for burial. Jesus was looking ahead. But it strains the imagination to believe Mary was thinking ahead along those lines. Rather than anticipating what was to come, I believe Mary was responding to what had already occurred. Mary was thanking Jesus for restoring her brother to life. Gratitude could be the only explanation, a gratitude so great that no expense and no rules of social decorum could contain her. Mary put everything aside and lost herself in expressing thanksgiving to the Jesus, the Lord of life.

Mary was willing to give everything she had, and make no mistake about this: Jesus approved. John describes how Mary's lavish gesture filled the whole house with the fragrance of the perfume. Think about it: prior to what Mary did, it was the aroma of death that pervaded the place – not literally so, but death was certainly in the air: Lazarus' recent death, Jesus' impending death, the threat of the chief priests and the Pharisees hanging over them all. Mary's selfless deed transformed the aroma of death into the fragrance of love and life. Jesus was grateful for her gratitude. When Matthew (26:6-13) described the same scene, he reports that Jesus said that wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what Mary did "will be told in memory of her." Perhaps Mary's selfless gift, and the lingering aroma of the perfume gave Jesus the strength the press on into Jerusalem the next day. Perhaps it calmed his fears.

Of course, not everyone approved of Mary's lavish expression of devotion. Gratitude is one thing. Throwing away precious resources is quite another. Judas immediately objected that a far better use of the expensive perfume would have been to sell it. Imagine how you could help with poor with \$24,000. This week as I lingered over Judas' reaction, a particular movie line came to mind. Believe it or not, it comes from the 1978 film "Animal House." The character Otter, portrayed by Tim Matheson learns that his unruly fraternity has been kicked off campus, and all the degenerate members expelled from the college. He declares, "*This situation absolutely requires that a really stupid and futile gesture be done on somebody's part.*" Judas would call Mary's deed "a really stupid and futile gesture." He might have said the same thing to the Bishop of London, who parted with his perfectly good tooth. What a really stupid and futile gesture.

While our language might be more diplomatic than Judas', the scene in Bethany raises red flags for us too. Especially in these days of heightened sensitivity to the boundaries of personal space, Mary's actions cause our minds to go places we'd rather not have them go. We might caution Mary to back off, and Jesus to back away from an encounter that some would be sure to misinterpret as erotically charged. It was no way for anyone running for the office of Messiah to behave. It would be one more argument in the case that Jesus' enemies were building against him. Nevertheless, the fact remains that Jesus approved of Mary's act of splendid self-forgetfulness. It's almost as if it came as a relief that finally someone understood. Being one of his followers wasn't about jockeying for positions of power and prestige in an earthly kingdom, which describes the ambitions of certain other disciples. True discipleship is to lose yourself in acts of gratitude to the Lord, the giver of life.

Mary was among the first to get it. Others would follow, including one Saul of Tarsus, later to become Paul the Apostle, the author of today's reading we heard from Philippians (3:4-14). Saul was living an enviable life for a person of his time. His credentials were impeccable among his fellow Jews, and he had every reason to be confident that he would rise to high levels in the kingdom of God that was Israel's entire reason to be. Then Saul had an experience on the Road to Damascus that knocked him completely off his buttoned-up, predictable path. Saul met the risen Jesus and came to realize, as did Mary of Bethany, that Jesus was the Lord of life. Saul understood that the great story God had been telling through the Jews had come to its climax in Jesus. Now, because of Jesus, nothing in all of creation would be able to separate him from the love of God. Thus, Saul would become Paul, and write in today's Epistle: *But whatever gain I had I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the*

*surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him.* Paul seems to be saying that no act of devotion or self-sacrifice could be too excessive to show his thanks for the new life Jesus had given him. Merely to know Jesus surpassed the value of everything else he had earned or inherited.

How about you and me? Have you paused this Lent in gratitude to God for all the blessings of this life? Consider this: the elephant in the living room is us. It is that we exist at all. You and I never had to be, but here we are. God called us forth from nothingness into life to share the joy of existence. When we became subject to evil and death, God sent Jesus to forgive the sins of the whole world. Then God raised Jesus from death and opened to us the gates of everlasting life. If and when you take in the enormity of God's grace, you might feel a bit like Mary in the presence of her restored brother, Lazarus. Even if the whole realm of nature were ours to give in thanksgiving, it would still be an offering far too small.

I will never forget a wonderful person from a parish I served before Grace Church. Betty was an elderly woman who was prim and proper, and a person of deep, quiet, Christian faith. She and her husband, Jack, had been members of the church for many years. By their address it was clear that they had ample resources, but they were not showy at all and kept mostly to themselves. A few years into my tenure the vestry and I realized it was time to address some serious building deficiencies and embark on a capital campaign. Capital campaigns seem to be a recurring theme in my ministry. It is why people cross to the other side of the street when they see me coming! So it was time for another campaign. The plans called for an entirely new parish building that would benefit nearly every program of the church. It was an ambitious project that we'd prayerfully discerned as God's calling to us. To accomplish it we'd need to raise several million dollars. Soon after we launched the campaign Betty did not cross to the other side of the street. Instead, she contacted me to let me know of her intention to give. I had no idea what to expect, but when she told me the size of her gift I nearly hit the floor: \$600,000.

About a year later, after a successful campaign we were off and running. Construction was well underway. Then the building site itself began presenting challenges we hadn't anticipated. The project was going to cost more than we thought, more than we raised. The campaign would need a second wind, and many parishioners agreed to increase their gifts. I contacted Betty and asked if she might do the same. To my surprise she explained to me that no, she could not. You see, she and Jack had lived by a financial arrangement that was common for families of their generation, but sounds old fashioned today. Jack made the money, and gave Betty an allowance to raise the children and run the household. What he gave her was hers to use as she saw fit, and he would ask no questions so long as the house was in order and the children flourished. Well, Betty did it all and more. The house was impeccable. The children prospered and grew and were living their own lives out of state. What is more, Betty turned out to be quite a shrewd business person, and over the years managed to invest what she hadn't spent to create a portfolio of her own. To make a long story short, her gift to the campaign was essentially everything she had under her control. She'd given her all, and it gave her great joy to do so. It was an extravagant, lavish gift to the Lord she loved and knew, in gratitude for a lifetime of blessings.

I think of Betty, and I think of Mary of Bethany, who *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.*

Here we are on the fifth and final Sunday in Lent, right on the brink of Palm Sunday and Holy Week. I pray that the aroma of gratitude fills this house too, even your life and mine as we press on toward the goal of the upward call of God, which is Christ Jesus himself, who has made us his own.

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Hibbert, *The Virgin Queen*, Addison-Wesley, 1991, p. 111.