

**Sunday 6 April 2025**  
**The Fifth Sunday of Lent**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**OT: Isaiah 43:16-21**

**NT: Philippians 3:4b-14**

**Gp: John 12:1-8**

I recently had a conversation with someone about Our Lady, Mary. The person I was talking to was an Anglican priest, a woman from a working class background. She's someone with a strong devotion to Mary, but she's critical of the way the church has sometimes portrayed her. You know the kind of thing: Mary as the meek, submissive woman. Mary as the sexless ideal of purity that no one can live up to and that is used to keep women in their place.

What my friend said really struck me. She didn't want to give up on Mary or push her out of Christian faith as has happened in many of the Protestant churches. She saw Mary in the highest terms, as the Mother of God. But her point was that this greatest of saints, this Godbearer, was at the same time an ordinary woman. Mary did not have to be especially pure and untainted by the world to deserve this calling. It was in being called by God that her ordinariness became radiant with the extraordinary gift of grace.

In today's terms, Mary was a woman of colour. A woman who was economically and politically marginal. A woman of real flesh and blood, an inspiration for a working-class woman like my friend. And a sign that each and every one of us is called to be a co-worker with the Spirit and bearer of the Word of God. However frail and faltering we are, that is the incredible value God puts on us.

This is relevant to our gospel reading today. A while ago I preached about the three Marys that feature so prominently in the gospels: Mary, the mother of Jesus; Mary Magdalene and Mary the friend of Jesus presented in our story this morning. In each case assumptions, limitations and prejudices have been projected on them, to control the influence and meaning of these powerful women. Our Lady has been cast as the ideal woman – submissive, meek and pure. Mary Magdalene, often seen as especially intimate with Jesus, was cast as a reformed sex worker. As for Mary, sister to Martha and Lazarus, the attempt to put her in a straitjacket is evident in the story itself. She is taken to task by Judas for being wasteful. For a moment, set aside the comment about Judas being a thief. That might well be a bit of later defamation, considering he is the villain of Jesus' passion. But even without that comment, even if Judas' motives are pure, what he says is instructive.

Because, on the face of it, Judas' comment is quite reasonable. Why all this waste? Why not be more prudent and give money to the poor? Yet behind the common sense, there is something else: fear, control, a heart grown cold and callused. Judas reacts because Mary has acted wildly. She's thrown off all sense decorum, of keeping her proper place. She literally

lets her hair down. She's not unlike the father in the parable of the prodigal son, who goes running out to meet his wayward child, all dignity forgotten – and who throws the prodigal the most lavish feast.

Mary too is lavish and without shame. In a patriarchal world, she claims the teacher and his teaching for her own. And, in a patriarchal world, she is subject to criticism and censure. She is, in its eyes, a wanton, wasteful woman.

Jesus will have none of it. He welcomes her actions. Not because he does not care about the poor; but because sometimes talk of charity and prudence and duty can become an evasion. An excuse. A way of avoiding what is right in front of us: the encounter with God's living presence.

Mary will not be distracted from this moment, from the joy of God's presence, made flesh in Jesus. And so, she meets the moment with all she can give. Sometimes we seem to think that God will only accept us if we come before God with gloom and self-loathing. Mary is a wonderful reminder that an encounter with God is first and foremost one of overwhelming joy and grace. A time for gifts to be shared, and to be shared outrageously.

And the way Mary acknowledges Jesus is striking. She uses the aromatic oil, nard. And we can imagine the scent of that oil filling the room. As the incense fills this church every Sunday, so Mary worships God's presence not just with dry words or dreary submission but with a riot of sensory delight.

But if we should think this is just mindless pleasure, the gospel reminds us: this anointing is also a foretaste of Jesus' death and burial. On Easter morning, the women will come to anoint his body. They will, despite all fear and faithlessness, bring the riches of creation to his corpse. And they will find him gloriously, beautifully risen.

Mary lives in the moment of God's presence. A moment of gifts. A moment where she gives herself to the work of welcoming grace. A moment of new life on the other side of all that deadens and destroys. Let us live that richness in our worship and our lives. For this is how we take delight in God and God takes delight in us.

It is the experience Paul recounts in the letter to the Philippians – 'I count everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord . . . I want to know Christ and the power of resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.' For Paul, to know Christ is to know the divine love which passes through death to life. It is worth everything to greet that love when it comes. So, when new life and love are offered, do not hide your heart: pour it out. Become the love that God gives you.

Mary, the mother of God, was typecast as a pure, submissive vessel. She was not: she was the Godbearer, the singer of songs, the ordinary woman who is full of grace. Mary Magdalene was typecast as the penitent prostitute. She was not: she was, unrepentantly, the friend and follower of Jesus and a leader of the church. And Mary, sister of Martha, is typecast as an over-emotional, wasteful, imprudent woman. She is not: she is the very image of worship, of a life dedicated joyfully to the one who dies and rises for us.

Charity is good. Giving is good. Supporting food banks is good. But, in another way, none of that is good: for all of it is symptomatic of a world where people live in poverty, hunger and neglect. In Lent, as we continue to practise works of charity, we should also never forget the deeper truth to which we are called: a kingdom where all not only feed but feast; where all are called to fullness of life; where, like Mary, every one of us becomes an icon of God's abundant love.

**Fr Steven Shakespeare**