

But the issue is more than just discernment. Mary was not blowing up helium balloons to celebrate her discernment of Jesus' presence. She wasn't lighting candles on a cake out of gratitude for her discernment of what Jesus meant to her. By pouring on him the costly ointment, she was anointing Jesus for death.

*"Leave her alone,"* Jesus said in defence of her actions. *"She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial."* Mary's costly gift of gratitude grew out of an awareness of the cost of Jesus' gift of sacrifice - his own life.

As New Testament scholar Gail O'Day has observed, *"She gives boldly of herself in love to Jesus at his hour, just as Jesus will give boldly of himself in love at his hour... The vision of a community shaped by love and grounded in relationship to Jesus is first enacted by a female disciple who has no claim to that position."* (New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. IX, Abingdon, p. 703.)

Maybe that's the key - those who recognise the cost of kindness and redemption are those who love most freely and most generously. It should come as no surprise, then, that self-sufficient executives shove pledge cards through the door like tips to bellboys while widows who can barely afford to feed themselves and their cats joyously pour out the costly ointment.

Where does that leave you? Glad, I trust to know the lavishness of the grace of Christ in your life – and keen to live that out here in your local church – whatever that will mean for you.

**Amen!! Thanks be to God!!**

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## *A Message from Mark!* **Holy Adoration**

21 March 2010 - Lent 5  
Scripture ~ John 12:1-8

**Theme:** The surest sign of discernment of the holy is adoration. Mary's lavish adoration of Jesus reveals her insight into the significance of his life and of the holiness of this moment near to the cross. How lavish are you in response to God?

**Intro:** Recently I heard of a minister who, one Sunday, when he received the offering plates from the ushers, held them up to the heavens, and offered this prayer of dedication: *"O Lord, despite what we say, this is what we really think of you."*

Many years ago, I volunteered to serve on the stewardship team at our home church in Brisbane. The main job was to go out on **"Stewardship Sunday"** with a handful of pledge cards and call on some members, seeking financial pledges for the coming year. This turned out to be a fascinating and eye-opening experience. The act of being asked for money evoked from people their true feelings about the church and their faith: the joyful rejoiced, the self-centered resisted, and the unhappy complained.

I never will forget two visits I made back-to-back. One was to a man who served as the chief development officer for a major charity. *"This will be a piece of cake,"* I remember thinking. *"This guy knows the meaning of charitable giving, and he will surely respond with the same generosity he relies on in his own work."*

To my astonishment, though, he wouldn't even let me in the house. He opened the front door an inch or two, begrudgingly took the pledge card through the crack, scribbled a pittance on it and signed it as I stood and waited, then he shoved it back at me, pulling the door closed with a crisp and final snap.

The next visit was to a woman I hardly knew – an elderly widow on a fixed income. She and her striped cat lived in a modestly furnished unit. When I told her I was from the church, she said she was pleased to see me and invited me in for a chat, during which she indicated her appreciation for all the church had meant to her. When the time came to pass over the pledge card, she took it from my hand with joy and increased her pledge, which I knew would mean some sacrifice for her.

How to account for generosity and devotion? When Jesus was at dinner with his disciples and some of his friends that night in Bethany, there was a dramatic and profound act of devotion. But, just as was the case for me on those stewardship visits, it came from an unexpected source. It didn't come from Peter, or James, or John, and it certainly didn't come from Judas, who loudly protested its extravagance when it occurred.

It didn't even come from Lazarus, whose presence at the dinner party was possible only because Jesus had raised him from the dead. It came instead from Mary, who took a bottle of very expensive perfume and poured it on Jesus' feet then wiped his feet with her hair. How to account for such generosity and devotion?

Part of the secret of generosity and devotion is discernment. Those who pour out adoration toward God are those who have a discerning sense of what is truly at stake, what is really happening in life.

As is the case with many of the stories in John, things are happening here at two levels at the same time. Indeed, much of John's theology has to do with encouraging his readers to wear bifocals, to be able to see what is happening at the surface but also to discern what is occurring at a deeper level, too.

At the surface level, Jesus is at the home of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha, three siblings who live in Bethany. In the middle of the meal, Mary spreads a bottle of costly perfume on Jesus' feet and washes his feet with her hair. It is clearly an act of lavish devotion (the perfume was worth 300 denarii, nearly a year's wages), but it has all the impracticality of spending a year's worth of grocery money on a birthday present - devotion is one thing, but prudence is another. Judas, the treasurer, points out that the mission budget has been damaged by this deed: ***"This money could have been given to the poor."***

But look with me at what is happening beneath the surface. First of all, John carefully tells us that the Passover is near and notes that ***"Lazarus was one of***

***those at table."*** The Passover foreshadows the hour of Jesus' death, and Lazarus is a rather amazing dinner guest, since he is the only living person in Bethany who has spent some time dead in a tomb. He was raised from death by Jesus in the previous account (John 11), and his presence is a symbol of death and resurrection. The word for "dinner" is used elsewhere in John's Gospel to refer to the last supper.

Also, Judas is unmasked by the narrator not as a judicious manager of the group's money, but as a greedy thief. Mary wipes Jesus' feet, and the verb is the same as that used to describe Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet at the last supper. Already we are beginning to see that things are more than they appear on the surface. The most important difference between the surface and the depth, of course, is what Mary's act means. On the surface, it was a well-meaning but overly expensive act of worship. But under the surface it was, Jesus tells us, a burial anointing: ***"She bought this perfume so that she might keep it for the day of my burial."***

If we are all to move, like Lazarus, from death to life, then it will require another death, Jesus' death. Jesus is about to enter Jerusalem and offer himself so that the world might have life and have it abundantly. Only Mary can see this clearly and she breaks out the costly perfume to mark this moment. The recording of this woman's act of love reminds the disciples of the limited time of Jesus' presence among them and the urgency to respond to Jesus while he is still here. Mary has recognized this limitedness and responded to it. What about you?

After our service this morning at our annual meeting we're being challenged to accept a deficit budget for the first time in many years. This gives us the chance to step out and show some faith in God and the generosity our mighty God stirs up within us. It seems to me this text is giving us a hint of how we might respond to God – with lavish generosity in our giving of time, abilities and money to underpin the ministries we are confident God has called us to!

Check the foyer of any large hospital during the morning, and you will hear the voices of the patients being discharged. Some cry out in rage ***"I'm going to be on crutches for a blankety-blank month, and I have to take six of these ### pills every day!"***, while others are full of gratitude and praise ***"Thank God for the blessings of good health."*** All of these patients are going home, but only some of them have the discernment to be thankful. In our story from John, the room was full of people, but only Mary discerned the presence of Jesus in a way that prompted true gratitude.