

The Perfect Host

Scientists are of one mind that pearls are the product of pain. A pearl is produced when the shell of an oyster gets pierced by a grain of sand. When this happens the oysters fights back, the foreign irritant that has entered is covered and a healing is the result. A pearl is eventually produced. It is written, "No other gem has such a fascinating history. It is a symbol of stress; it is a healed wound. It is an enduring story of a tiny creature's struggle to preserve life."

What scientists have discovered is that pearls are not the product of pleasure but of pain. They are healed wounds. If there had been no wound, there would be no pearl. Some oysters are never wounded and the men that seek for them throw them back into the sea.

This morning, our Gospel story is all about Mary. There is something special about Mary in the Gospels. She was the perfect host. At some point in her life, she let Jesus into her life. Like the oyster, he found his entry and at some point, Mary began to produce a pearl.

We don't know Mary's full story. But what we do know is she loved Jesus. What we do know is that Jesus made a huge difference in her life. Had she been healed? Had she been forgiven her sin? Possibly both, but there was a point when her life became host to the Son of God and he touched her life in such a way that Mary was forever changed.

35 years ago, I was involved in running a youth fellowship. It started from scratch and within a few years, we had over 60 young people in the village coming along. There was one girl in her early teens, who had recently moved to the village, she was angry, she was a closed book, she would not allow anyone to get too close to her. That's until Jesus found a way into her life and suddenly this little oyster produced a beautiful pearl, and this wee girl is now a mature woman with her own family and serving Jesus to this day.

God can enter the hardest of hearts, in the most unexpected ways and make a huge difference to someone's life. So, when we read this story of Mary and her wasteful gesture of giving away precious perfume, remember she has a history, she owes Jesus her life.

Mary, Martha and Lazarus are amongst Jesus' closest friends and Jesus appears to have visited them often on his way to Jerusalem. This time is his final time.

They host a dinner party in his honour! What an encouragement for the weary Jesus.

According to John's Gospel, the day we call Palm Sunday, is the next day; Jesus is about to enter into Jerusalem, for the last time, but for now, this little family had the privilege and the pleasure of welcoming and hosting Christ into their homes. Did they know that this was in fact God in human flesh sitting amongst them? Mary did!

So they throw a meal in his honour, and John's Gospel points out that Lazarus was sitting at the table. Yes, Lazarus, the man who had been buried the week before and brought back to life, was feasting at the table.

Mary has so much to be thankful for!

The Disciples were there and no doubt others. The emotions would be running high!

Mary is always found sitting at Jesus' feet; read the Gospels and Mary is right there at his feet; she is in awe of Jesus. She hangs onto his every word; she is in many ways the perfect disciple.

She would have been first at the prayer meetings and Bible studies. Mary wanted to get close to Jesus! He was in her life. He was her life!

Notice how Martha, her sister, serves Jesus in a different way. She is in the kitchen whilst Mary is listening to his every word. Martha works and Mary prays. There is a place in the Christian faith for both Mary and Martha. But when they are both found in the same person, then there is great work done in the church. We always need the spirit of Martha and Mary in our Churches working together.

Those two women had total faith in Jesus, and it is in their house that he stays on his way to the cross. Can you imagine hosting Jesus in your home?

What was the atmosphere like as they all squeezed in together? As they all shared a meal that Martha had made and served; the Disciples were there, Judas was there, and suddenly Mary breaks open the bottle of the most expensive perfume and pours it over Jesus' feet.

Mark's Gospel has Mary pouring it all over him – from his head down to his feet; John has Mary pouring it over his feet and she wiped his feet with her hair. Mary had something about Jesus' feet and John picked up on this. In fact

in the next chapter, he tells the story of Jesus washing and drying the Disciples' feet at the last Supper! Did Mary's gesture inspire Jesus?

Washing feet may be strange to us but not in Palestine. It was an expectation that the servant of the house would wash feet of the guests. It wasn't unusual for a Palestinian woman to wash someone's feet. Their climate was very dry and so feet became very dusty and dirty. It was a mark of respect and courtesy. But what was unusual was to wash feet with expensive perfume.

A year's wage was used!

I went onto the Harrod's website, to see what their most expensive perfume was, and incredibly they are selling perfume at £20,000 a bottle. Sorry Susan, outside my budget!

This perfume that Mary dispensed on Jesus was from North India, a rare and expensive perfume.

Extravagant, Audacious, and you may even say Wasteful.... the scent fills the room with the sweetest smelling scent. John notes this, "The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume!"

The atmosphere had now changed. Mary had changed the atmosphere with her kind act of random kindness. Remember Jesus was on his way to the cross! Mary makes this experience just a little easier!

She was hosting and honouring Jesus. We don't know the history of this perfume...was it her life savings? Was it an heirloom, passed on through generations?

But what we do know, is that it was rare, expensive and costly to Mary and no doubt her family. But what price would you put on your brother being restored from death? How much would you pay to have your loved one sitting at your side? Mary wasn't paying Jesus, simply responding to the gift of life and grace. As she looked across the room, and saw Lazarus sitting there, I'm sure she knew that this was the right thing to do and it was the right moment.

Jesus said, of another lady, who did a similar act, "*She loves much because she has been forgiven much.*"

This act of generosity is simply a response to the goodness of Jesus.

But it doesn't finish there, because she unties her long flowing hair, and wipes it on his feet. This was something no self-respecting Palestinian woman would

do, unless it was someone very close to her, like her husband. No woman's hair would be seen outside of the family home. But Mary lets her long hair flow and uses it as a towel to dry his feet.

With Jesus, one never knew what would happen next, and this was a special occasion where Jesus said of another woman, *"Wherever the Gospel is preached, this story must be told."*

The house would be silent as the house was filled with a lovely aroma; would there be tears of joy? This was the moment that Mary honours Jesus. This was the moment that her life became a pearl of great price. She honours her guest with this dedication service. She is self-emptying herself and making herself totally available to serve him. She is making a statement that she is fully committed to serving Jesus and so serving God.

I believe that Mary understood what Jesus was all about; Better than anyone else in that house that day and this act shows it!

In the words of the renowned theologian Henri Nouwen, "Our fulfilment is in offering emptiness, our usefulness in becoming useless, our power in becoming powerless. It indeed belongs to the core of the Christian message that God did not reveal himself to us as the powerful other, unapproachable in his omniscience, omnipotence and omnipresence, in other words in his mighty power. Instead he came to us in Jesus Christ, who did not cling to his equality with God, but emptied himself...and became as men are, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross." Phil 2 6-8

Mary understood this, and she glimpsed in Jesus the self-emptying of God, she saw his sacrifice and so she also gave all that she had to anoint him. It is a beautiful moment in the Gospels, one to be treasured.

Rather than savouring the moment, Judas, the treasurer, the one charged with looking after the finances, speaks up. He strongly objects to the waste. He sees it purely in terms of money. He misses the point entirely! A year's wage...wasted in a few moments, this perfume could have been sold and used to help the poor, he said!

He was right...of course, it could have been!

The atmosphere changes in the house, with Judas' words, suddenly negativity creeps into the room, Judas is judgemental of Mary, accusing her of wasting valuable resources that could be used for the poor. But he was also challenging

Jesus for allowing Mary to do such a thing, and within a moment the fragrance that had filled the house had become a foul smell.

Judas had changed the atmosphere, with a few crushing words. But we will leave Judas for another day, this day is about Mary and her beautiful deed!

No doubt the conversation about perfume and anointing his body after his death had been shared before and Mary had made the arrangements to anoint Jesus' body with the perfume after his death but the event of the previous day with her brother being brought back to life had spurred Mary into action. She wanted to demonstrate her love to Jesus while he was still with her.

It is a beautiful story; one could almost say it is a love story; Mary loved Jesus in the sense of what he done for her and Jesus loved Mary for allowing him into her life. It is a good story for us to focus on this Lent.

On the day of Resurrection, John has Mary, standing outside the tomb crying, for she thinks his body has been taken away. She sees what she thinks is the gardener and she asks him, *"Where have you put his body?"* Jesus said to her one word, *"Mary"*...That was enough, just her name. She knew his compassionate voice. Is this the same Mary that anointed him just a few days earlier? We are not sure but Mary from Bethany would not have been far away from the empty tomb. Her task after all, was to anoint his body after his death, but that task had already been done in Bethany!

We started with the story of the pearl. Where are we in the pearl's story? Have we allowed the piece of grit to enter into our lives? It can enter in different ways and at different times. It could be at a time of illness, bereavement. It can be when we have a child and in those existential moments God enters. It happens when our lives are simply open to God's Spirit.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Amen.