Sunday 7th April 2019 Scandalous Love

Philippians 3.4b-14,

John 12.1-8, (Isaiah 43.16-21, Psalm 126)

Scandalous Love! Not perhaps what you expect to hear talked about in church on a Sunday morning - yet that’s what’s on offer today!

Other words for Scandalous are shameful, disgraceful, immoral, outrageous - **who** could these words be used about? I can hear the men of the time muttering, huh bound to be a woman - well, yes in part it is – this morning we are looking at Mary of Bethany, sister to houseproud Marth and Lazarus, he who was raised from the dead after 4 days in his tomb.

Mary of Bethany - The archetypal worshipper and intimate follower of Christ, Mary of Bethany is described in the Bible as "seated at the Lord's feet, listening to His word" (Luke 10:39). She is one of the most beautiful characters in all of Scripture, preparing the way for our Lord’s burial.

We meet Mary three times in Scripture, beginning with the incident in the home of her sister, Martha, where Jesus, and presumably the disciples who travelled with Him, were being entertained. This is probably her most appearance. Jesus commended her for “choosing the better part,” meaning that Mary’s desire to be near her Lord and hang onto His every word was far more beneficial than running herself ragged with preparations for a meal. Jesus further said that choosing the better thing, learning of the Lord, would not be taken away from Mary. Her priority in life was Christ, the knowledge of Him, and the nearness to Him will be remembered throughout eternity.

           As those who have been to the Holy Land will appreciate during the last week of his life, Jesus stayed in Bethany, about two miles from Jerusalem because Jerusalem itself would have been packed to bursting with millions of pilgrims preparing for the Feast of Passover. At a dinner to honour Jesus, Mary poured a pint of pure nard imported from India on his feet. Then she wiped his feet with her hair. The aroma filled the house. It fills this house this morning too. ( Pass around tissues impregnated with Spikenard)

           Almost every detail of this story breaks the social boundaries of the day: a dinner to honour Jesus ends in acrimony and arguments; a woman lies down at the feet of Jesus, not only that she lets down her hair, only immoral women showed their hair in public, only immoral women would publicly caress a man’s feet with outrageously expensive oil and then use her hair to wipe away the excess!!!!

What was Mary doing?

In fact, Mary did more than she knew. Anointing Jesus was a gesture of personal devotion; but it was also a prophetic act: "When she poured this perfume on my body, she prepared me for my burial." Jesus said, Mary recognised that Jesus wasn't just a wandering sage or renegade rabbi; she recognised Him as **the** Anointed One. Anointed by Mary, yes, but especially by God.

What is the Spirit of God saying to each of us in this story of wild excess during this Lenten season of self-denial?

In the epistle for this week, Paul says that nothing compares to the reciprocal giving and receiving of God's overflowing goodness: "Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection of the dead."

In today’s lectionay reading from Isaiah, God invites us to "forget the former things. Do not dwell on the past. See, I'm doing a new thing. I'm making a way in the desert, streams in the wasteland."

When we give our old selves to God without restraint, when we give Him all that we have and all that we are, in return, we trust God for a new self, shaped by his unlimited love. In the words of this week's psalmist, we sow in tears, with the hope to reap in joy.

Mary shows us the way in her Scandalous Love for Jesus.

 I love her extravagant devotion to Him, she just does not care what other people think, what society’s norms are.

In Matthew 10 we read that Jesus gave His twelve disciples authority to perform dramatic signs and wonders; the sick were healed and the demonized were set free. Yet no such thing is recorded about Mary. She is distinguished simply because she is so often found to be at the feet of Jesus (Luke 10:39, John 11:32; 12:3).

John chapter 13 reveals Jesus washing His disciples' feet with water. Go back one chapter to Chap 12 and we encounter Mary anointing Jesus' feet with costly oil and wiping them with her hair *And the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil* (John 12:3).

Mary's action changed the spiritual atmosphere in that house. Two powerful fragrances were released: The natural fragrance of spikenard and the spiritual fragrance of worship and devotion.

BUT, Judas reacted: *"Why was this fragrant oil not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?"* (***John 12:5***).

Judas knew exactly how much the expensive oil was worth in monetary terms (the equivalent of a year's wages). But he didn't only react because of the apparent waste. The spiritual fragrance of Mary's worship exposed the deceit in Judas' heart.

There was a clash of two spiritual rules. Mary released the rule of love. Judas released the rule of greed – *"This he said, not that he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief, and had the money box; and he used to take what was put in it"* (***John 12:6***). Whom we worship exerts influence and changes atmospheres not only our own lives but in the lives of others.

How was it that although Jesus had informed His disciples several times that His death was imminent, in fact in 6 days time, they didn't seem to understand. Yet Mary understood that Jesus was going to die and anointed Him for the day of His burial.

Because Mary sat at Jesus' feet she had rare insight into the heart of God. She understood the purpose of Jesus' mission. She discerned His need and His deep vulnerability. Going to the Cross was no easy task for Jesus. **By anointing Him with costly oil she ministered directly to His heart. She recognized a unique opportunity that others missed.**

**Mary changed the atmosphere in that room by ministering to Jesus, to God's heart.**

Today Jesus calls us not only to minister to others in His Name but also to sit at His feet, so that our hearts may learn to beat in time with His and that we may soak in His Scandalous Love for us. For what is more scandalous than that God, the Father Almighty Maker of Heaven and Earth should come to meet us in the person of His Son Jesus, not only meet us, but die FOR us ~ Scandalous, outrageous Love passes two ways from Him to us and from us to Him.

Mother Teresa once prayed, "I will take what you give, and I will give what you take."

What is the Holy Spirit saying to you, to me as we move towards the final weeks of Jesus life – what extravagance does He want us to pour out to Him, what extravagance does He want to pour into our own lives? May I commend each of us to find the time to sit at His feet, to listen to His Holy Spirit, to wait, to be expectant for His Scandalous Love to flood over us and then look for the opportunity to pour out our Scandalous Love upon His feet. Amen