

Theme: “God revealed in the extravagant demonstrations of God’s people...”

Readings: Isaiah 43:16-21; John 12:1-8

Important note: *In this sermon I talk about the sensitive issues of terrorism and persecution. One of the disadvantages of reading a sermon online instead of hearing it live is that people don’t get the chance to talk with me to clarify points made. After some feedback I received from parishioners I have added **Post-sermon clarifications** to this copy of the sermon to clarify areas that could have been a bit clearer or were open to interpretation.*

I remember reading about a pastor who was greatly admired for his ability to preach up a storm. But he was even more admired for his charity work. Every Sunday as church was finishing he would announce that he was leaving to spend the afternoon in the next city over working with the poor inner city communities, preaching to them and feeding them. But he wasn’t going to the city to minister to the poor. For years he had been keeping a secret from his church, his wife, and his kids. Every Sunday after church he would have his golf clubs in the boot of his car and he would drive to the next city over to the premier golf course. For years the angels watched this dishonest pastor and eventually they decided to do something about it. They approach the throne of God and tell Him all about how the pastor has been lying to his congregation about helping the poor and that he should be punished. God strokes his chin and agrees that something should be done. So that Sunday the pastor drives to the golf course, takes out his golf clubs, and readies his ball on the first hole. His swing generates impressive distance but the direction was off and it looks like the ball is going to miss. But suddenly God causes a strong gust of wind to blow the ball back on course. A hole-in-one. On the second hole the pastor performs a better swing and his ball lands about a hand’s length from the hole. And God causes a mini-earthquake to knock the ball into the hole. And this happens for the rest of the afternoon. 18 holes and 18 holes-in-one. The angels are livid. “You were supposed to punish the pastor! Every Sunday he basks in the admiration of his congregation for supposedly helping the poor while he goes off to play golf! And instead you reward him with a game that would make Tiger Woods weep with envy!?” God pauses and calmly says “Yeah but who can he brag about the game to?”

Beware falsely using the pretense of charity to further your own status and reputation.

And this is what we see happening in today’s reading.

So what is happening in the Gospel story? Jesus has come to the house of Simon for a feast that is being thrown in his honour. And while Martha was busy serving the meal, Mary did something truly scandalous. She produces a 500ml alabaster jar of pure nard, removes the stopper on it, and proceeds to anoint the feet of Jesus. What is nard? Nard was a rare spice imported from Northern India that was used in medicinal remedies, wine, and as a perfume. It’s said to have a strong earthy yet sweet scent. And it was very expensive. A pound of nard, the amount Mary had, cost just under a year’s wages for an average working class Jew. The oil was extracted from the leaves and shoots of the spikenard plant, but some unscrupulous sellers would also mix in the roots to increase the weight of the oil when it came to valuing it. And we know that Mary has a bottle of PURE nard. Now this brings up the question of how she came into possession of such an expensive and high class oil. It has been suggested that it may have been an heirloom passed down to her or even her dowry that she was supposed to give her husband if she was meant to be married. However

it was acquired, it was easily the most valuable possession she owned. And John says that she poured it in such a great amount that the scent filled the entire house.

But even more outrageously, Mary lets down her hair and uses it dry the feet of Jesus. And this is one of those things where you don't understand the weight of what's happening unless you understand the culture. Mary has transgressed a major societal norm. Much like in Islamic cultures and some Jewish cultures today, women were expected to keep their hair covered when out in public to preserve their modesty. In fact, it was normal in Jesus' time that the only male who would see a women's hair was her husband. One of the ways in which a women would be punished was to humiliate and shame her by publically unveiling her hair. And here Mary is unveiling her hair to dry the feet of Jesus.

You can imagine the disciples bristling at this very improper display by Mary. And Judas loudly objects. "Why wasn't this perfume sold so that the money could be given to the poor?"

To which Jesus admonishes Judas to leave her alone because it was intended that the perfume be used to anoint his body upon burial. Finally Jesus says "You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me".

Okay so there's a lot to unpack in this story. First let's talk about what Jesus is not saying. When Jesus is says "You will always have the poor among you", he is not looking at poverty and giving a defeatist shrug while saying "what's the point of trying to fix it?" as I have heard some argue. This is another of the many cases in which Jesus is referencing Old Testament teachings, in this case Deuteronomy 15 in which the principle of the Year of Canceling Debts was laid out. The passage states that every seven years the Israelites were to cancel any debts owed to them by a fellow Israelite. The text goes on to state "*However, there need be no poor people among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you, if only you fully obey the LORD your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today.*" The implication is that poverty only exists because of a lack of generosity and obedience to God amongst the people.

But the text does something interesting just a few verses later. Verse 11 states "*There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land.*" After all this talk of how there need not be poor people among you, the text flips that around and says that there will always be the poor among you. What's likely happening here is an acknowledgement that people probably were going to be greedy and disobedient. Afterall, for all of our talk about the wonders of the Year of Jubilee, there's no evidence that the Israelites ever got around to putting it into practice.

So Jesus is not saying, ignore the poor; rather he is taking an ancient command his disciples would have been familiar with and contrasting it with the humble obedience of Mary. Afterall, it seems that Mary has understood and accepted that Jesus will die soon and so she quietly and vulnerably prepares his body for burial. The disciples on the other hand, the men who followed Jesus the closest, still refuse to believe Jesus will die. It's almost if Jesus is saying, don't be so engrossed in your religious practices that you miss what God is doing in your midst.

And of course there's Judas. Judas makes a sensible point. The perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor especially seeing as Bethany, literally "House of the Poor" was a centre for taking care of the poor and vulnerable. After all, didn't the Law teach the importance of charity to the poor? Hasn't Jesus taught on this many times? Didn't Jesus tell rich people to sell their possessions and give the money to the poor?

However, there is an important detail we are told in the text. Judas is acting in bad faith. He was the group's treasurer and as such he would often abuse his position to take money for himself. He doesn't give a rip about the poor. Not only does he not care about the poor, he is actively stealing from him. His question does not come from a place of genuine concern but from a malicious desire to enhance his personal wealth and to shame a vulnerable woman for her extravagant act of obedience to Christ.

There's a quote by the pastor Brian McLaren that has long stuck with me. *"The most stubborn heresy in the history of monotheism (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) is the belief that God chooses people for exclusive privilege, not missional responsibility."*

In the Isaiah passage, Isaiah is reminding the Jews in exile that the God they follow is the same God who led them out of Egypt and through the waters to safety. The God who destroyed the chariots of Pharaoh is still at work in their exile. This God is honoured by the wild animals, the jackals, and the owls, because He provides water in the wilderness and the wasteland for His people. And the passage closes with a reminder to the Jews in exile that they were formed in order to proclaim God's praises. Being chosen by God is about missional responsibility to show the love of God to the world, not something to be lorded over others. And in fact we see this quite starkly in the Book of Jonah when Jonah doesn't want to warn the people of Nineveh to repent or face destruction because they are not of his people. And when he does obey and the people of Nineveh repent and turn to God, Jonah is angry and tells God that it would be better to be dead than to witness the salvation of Nineveh. For Jonah, being chosen was about enhancing his status and privilege, not showing others the extravagant love of God.

In his book *Allah: A Christian Perspective*, the renowned theologian Miroslav Volf writes of the relationship Christianity has historically had to imperialism and colonialism. He writes:

All four Gospels report that the last words of Jesus to his disciples included a commission to proclaim the good news. When Christians engaged in mission well, they did not try to spread the "Christian religion," let alone to establish a "Christian culture" or expand the "Christian sphere of influence"; they were bearing witness to Christ in word and deed, as Christ himself instructed them to do (see Acts 1:8). As witnesses, Christians were at their worst when zealous preachers followed in the wake of expansionist traders, businessmen, and conquering soldiers (for example, in 2003 evangelical preachers arrived in Iraq immediately after the soldiers). At the same time, missionaries have consistently been amongst the most dogged critics of aggression and exploitative business practices of their countrymen. As bearers of the good news, Christians have a somewhat mixed track record. But mission and the Christian faith are inseparable.

Many Muslims see Christian mission as war by other means, Muslim's fears of Christian mission are fed by a sense that the West, often mistakenly described as "Christian", has

subjected Muslims to “humiliation and disgrace” for “more than eighty years”... (pages 207-208)

The fact is that for many non-Christians, especially minorities, Christianity and the guise of Christian culture (often referred to as Christendom) has long been associated with preserving the interests of the empire and the superiority and privilege of the powerful, especially white men.

Post-sermon clarification: *In my sermon preached at the second service I went off-notes and spoke about how white supremacy has historically been the sin of the Western Church since the dawn of the Modern Era. Examples of this have been Christian justifications of Manifest Destiny, the chattel slavery of Africans, the genocide of Native Americans, the segregation and lynching of African-Americans to “protect the sexual purity of white women”, the British and European colonialism projects, and the USA’s disastrous foreign policy that has advanced American interests at the expense of other non-white nations. The Middle-Eastern Christian priest Mitri Raheb writes in his book “Faith in the Face of Empire” that the Empire has provided the hard power to conduct military occupation and colonialism while the Church has often provided the “soft power” or halo that justifies the morality of these actions.*

On the 15th March, at 1:40pm a white nationalist and member of the alt-right walked into two mosques in Christchurch and murdered 50 Muslims while they prayed, many of whom had come to New Zealand as refugees. Having watched the rise in popularity of white nationalism over the past few years the fact that a white nationalist had committed a terrorist attack did not come as a surprise to me. And I remember someone saying “oh great, now the Muslims are going to bomb our churches now in revenge”. To which I explained that our response to the Muslim community would go a long way to deciding that. Any expert on terrorism will tell you that extremist groups, whether they be Muslim or white supremacist, will target people who feel alienated from their society and they thrive on hatred towards the people they’re trying to recruit. That night I went home and penned a Facebook post that I’m going to half quote/half summarize:

“I think blaming this on mental illness is a cop-out.

*No, having read all 75 pages of his manifesto I believe these were the actions of an EVIL person (**Post sermon clarification:** My interest in the manifesto was of an academic nature. In accordance with the Chief Censors decision to ban possession of the terrorist’s manifesto on 23/3/19 I no longer own a copy of the manifesto). This person cultivated a worldview that said that:*

- 1) Muslims do not belong in our society,*
- 2) Muslims are dangerous, and*
- 3) Muslim lives aren’t as valuable as ours*

This is an evil worldview. However, he did not develop this in a vacuum. We are all influenced by our society and some of you can probably guess where I’m going with this. He cultivated this worldview and it is highly likely that others helped him along this path, whether they knew it or not.

*Think of the last meme, comment, or conversation you witnessed about Muslims prior to today. Was it positive? Or did it fall under any of the three points I mentioned above? Every time we tell a joke that demonises Muslims, every time we share a fake news story about Muslims without verifying its validity (and Christians, this is a grave sin; Exodus 20:16), you contribute to the cultivation of this worldview. And I say this because in the manifesto he talks at length about the (debunked) conspiracy theory that Muslims are outbreeding whites, (**Post-sermon clarification:** The YouTuber “Shaun” has an excellent video looking at this topic called [The Great Replacement Isn't Real](#)) that they're forcing sharia law wherever they go, that they want to wipe us out, that "cultural marxists" are trying to wipe out the white race (**Post-sermon clarification:** The term “cultural marxism” originates from the Nazi term and conspiracy theory Cultural Bolshevism/Jewish Bolshevism which stated that the Jews were trying to undermine German society). And I have seen all of these conspiracy theories shared by multiple people in my friends list. And I'm not going to pretend I've never done that. I used to say awful things about Muslims that I'm deeply ashamed of. They were said with malice but also ignorance because I had never taken the time to meet and talk to Muslims.*

One of the best analogies I've ever read about bigotry is that it's like a house fire - it starts in a single room but it never stays confined to it.”

In the days following the attack I was amazed at the extravagant generosity of Kiwis towards the Muslim victims. At the time of writing, the official GiveALittle fundraiser was sitting at just over nine million dollars. And many other charities have been collecting money for the victims. On the day of remembrance my boss allowed staff members to wear scarves in solidarity with the Muslim community and was kind enough to allow me to wear my large black and white keffiyeh from Palestine draped over my shoulders in remembrance of the Palestinian victims.

But ugliness didn't take long to surface. I saw one person on Stuff.co.nz complaining that the government was wasting the nine million dollars on the victims when that money should have gone to the poor, to which I rather snarkily asked if he realised that the nine million was raised by ordinary Kiwis, not the government. There was a rather stunning picture of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern wearing a headscarf out of respect for the dead, to which many Christians called her a traitor to New Zealand. Under an article about how Muslims are ordinary people like you or I, I saw a Muslim lady bemoan that she was tired of having to constantly prove her humanity to others. And, now I'm probably going to step on some toes here but hey I'm not chasing popularity from the pulpit, there was an uptick in people sharing old stories of Christian persecution asking why people weren't talking about this. And unfortunately one of the sites that was really pushing that whataboutism angle is a white nationalist news site that pushes the idea that Muslims are dangerous, don't belong in our society, and aren't deserving of life - same views that the terrorist expressed in his manifesto that Muslims are. And I remember a Christian friend of mine active in ministering to the Muslim community in Christchurch commenting that those articles were the most tone deaf response Christians could make before a week had even passed while the rest of the nation responded with deep compassion.

Post-sermon clarification: *I'm not saying that it's wrong to talk about the persecution of our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world. That's a very important topic to talk about.*

What I'm saying is the timing and method of sharing the articles was unwise/unempathetic while a minority community was grieving and came across like Christians trying to steal the spotlight away from a grieving local community when really we should have been mourning with those who mourn (Rom. 12:15). There was also the aspect that some of the sources pushing this narrative of whataboutery were white nationalist sources meant that not everyone talking about Christian persecution was acting in good faith.

Across the various gospel accounts we see a woman, a vulnerable and looked down upon member of society, recklessly prostrating herself at Jesus' feet, honouring him with extravagant obedience. And the disciples of Jesus - the very people who are supposed to be his obedient servants - are indignant at the display of devotion this woman shows to Jesus. They demand that it be stopped and that the woman's efforts be placed elsewhere, perhaps even that they she should stand back and let the disciples take care of things. But Jesus defends her and tells his disciples that when the Gospel is preached the memory of what she did that day would be told, and by implication, the reaction of the disciples would be shamed.

May God lead us to release the need to seek power, wealth, and status, and may God stir in us a heart for missional responsibility. May God mold us to be like Mary, recklessly and lovingly obeying Jesus. And may God teach us to love others extravagantly so that we may demonstrate the love and glory of God, modeling what it means to live redeemed lives to others.