

Reflection for Tuesday in Holy Week

Matthew 26.6-13

Now while Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, and she poured it on his head as he sat at the table. But when the disciples saw it, they were angry and said, 'Why this waste? For this ointment could have been sold for a large sum, and the money given to the poor.' But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, 'Why do you trouble the woman? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in all the world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.'

Reflection

I am not usually one for romantic or extravagant gestures, as my wife Priscilla will happily confirm. But I did make an exception one Christmas. Admittedly under the influence of an advert featuring Nicole Kidman, I bought Priscilla a bottle of Chanel No 5. It was not a large bottle. But neither was it cheap. I could have bought three bottles of single malt whisky for the price.

However, it's fair to say that the perfume lasted longer than the whisky would have done. A few drops every so often, mainly on special occasions, and several years later the Chanel No 5 was still there on Priscilla's dressing table, not yet exhausted.

In the incident that took place in the house of Simon the leper, recounted in the Gospel reading, what seems to shock the disciples most is not just that a woman unrelated to Jesus should carry out this intimate act of anointing him with nard, but that she should have done so in such an extravagant way. Not just a dab here or there – it appears she pours out the entire jar over the head of the Messiah. "Why the waste?", they complain, calculating in their heads the cost of this ointment. But Jesus does not rebuke the woman, but praises her for her actions. Unlike the disciples, Jesus does not count the cost of the anointing but instead reckons with its value and its meaning. It is an act of prophecy, anticipating Jesus' coming death and burial. It is also an act of worship, of adoration, of love.

It is the nature of worship, and of love, that it does not deal in half-measures. Love is about self-giving, without reserve. There are telling words in the marriage service that accompany the giving of rings: "All that I am I give to you, and all that I have I share with you." All. Not just a part.

The woman at the house of Simon in Bethany pours out the entire jar. It is an act of worship and love that points forward to Jesus on the cross, pouring out his life for the life of the world. He holds nothing back in the supreme act of sacrificial, self-giving love, and instead empties himself, just as the woman has emptied that jar of precious perfume.

And how are we to respond to that self-giving love? As we sing in the great Good Friday hymn: "*Love so amazing, so divine, demands my life, my soul, my all*"