

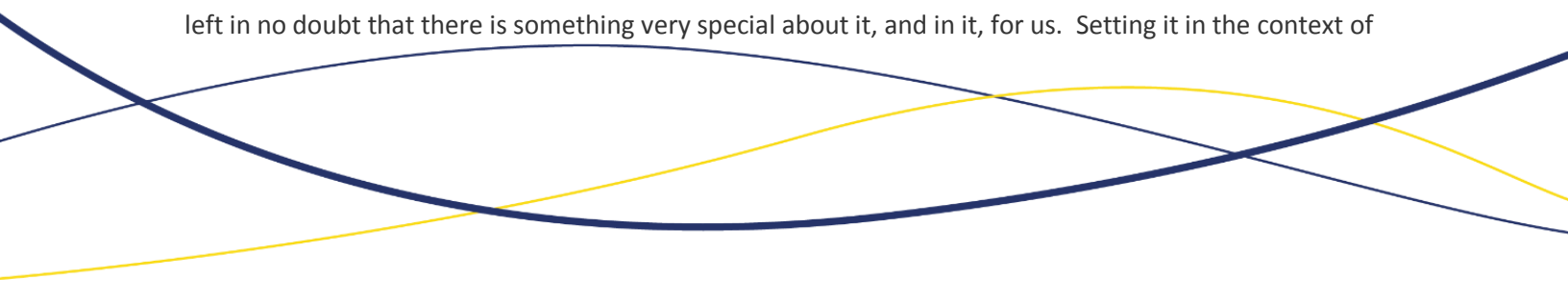
## ***A Whole Jar of Perfume***

This week is Refugee Week. A week in which to ponder especially how we look upon the vulnerable people in our world, how we treat them and, most importantly, to give a long and honest look at what is within our own hearts.

There is a story in the Gospels about an alabaster jar and a woman who anointed Jesus with costly perfume and I think it has much to say to us. Well, there are our stories actually, one in each of the four Gospels. These stories have similarities and differences. It is not certain, however, whether it is the same woman and the same occasion referred to in each story or whether these accounts refer to separate events, although many scholars would agree that Luke's story does in fact refer to a different event. Mark, Matthew and John tell a similar story with the difference that John names the woman as Mary, brother of Lazarus, whereas in the other two accounts she is unnamed. These writers do not comment on her moral standing. Luke's woman, however, is unnamed but she is referred to as a sinner. The home Jesus was dining in is variously referred to as that of a Pharisee, or that of Simon the leper, and John tells us that Martha – the sister of Mary and Lazarus - was serving, so we assume it was in their home.

Here is the story: "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 of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head as he was reclining at the table. But some were there who said to one another in anger, 'Why this waste? This ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor'. And they scolded her. But Jesus said, 'Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me. When she poured this perfume on my body she did it to prepare me for burial. I tell you the truth, wherever the good news is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her'" (Mark 14: 3-9 and Matthew 26: 6 – 13 and a similar version in John 12:1-8).

The story told by Mark and Matthew is in the context of Jesus's impending death. It is part of the introduction to the passion narrative. It is fascinating that the story ends with the promise or the instruction that this story be told everywhere and always, whenever the story of Jesus is told. We are left in no doubt that there is something very special about it, and in it, for us. Setting it in the context of



the passion narrative, the Gospel writers make a point. Yes, Jesus does point to her act as an anointing for his burial, but we also see in her act that which parallels his own outpouring and self-giving in love.

In Luke's story, however, which was the Sunday Gospel text read two weeks ago, we see this woman standing behind Jesus, pouring the ointment over his feet rather than his head, weeping and wiping his feet with her long hair (Luke 7:36 – 50). Luke's story comes much earlier in his Gospel than the one told by Mark and Matthew. Set in the context of Jesus dining in the home of a Pharisee, Luke makes the very strong point that none of the usual conventions of hospitality had been shown to Jesus by his host. It was the custom in those days that when guests entered the home of a host after walking the hot and dusty streets, servants washed their feet. But Luke has Jesus say this to his host: "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment". And Jesus uses this great contrast between the rather low-key welcome into his host's home and the outpouring of this woman's lavish attention to make a point about love and forgiveness. He assures the woman that her many sins have been forgiven because she has shown such great love.

It's fascinating exploring the different elements of these stories, but one thing they have in common is the jar of ointment. In all four stories we find the alabaster jar of perfume! So let's look into this and ponder what it might be saying to us.

A whole jar of perfume! And costly perfume at that. Three hundred denarii was about a year's wages. Nard, also called spikenard, is an essential oil derived from various flowering plants, and was used in the ancient world as a perfume, medicine and in religious contexts - for example it was offered on the incense altar in the Jerusalem Temple. The identity of the various plants used is not always certain but some grew in the Himalaya Mountains of Nepal and India, in parts of the Middle East and Asia, and it was imported into Israel. Because of its lovely aroma and rarity it was considered precious and was used for royal anointing ceremonies and other special occasions.

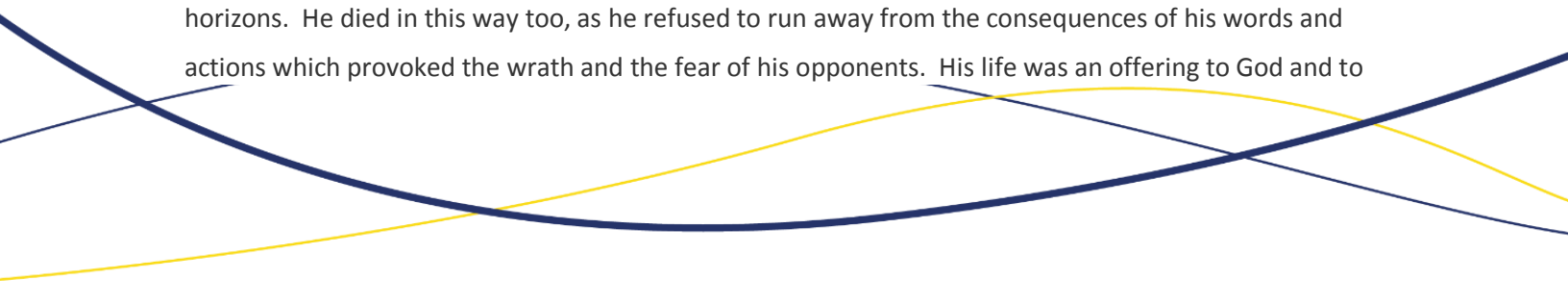
And she simply poured the whole jar over his head! Such extravagance!

There is surely some statement being made here about Jesus' identity as she anointed him in this way. However, whoever this woman was, and whatever her reason, it is her action that speaks so powerfully

to us. She went right into the house, to where Jesus and the other guests were reclining at table in the manner of the day, and shocked and scandalized them as she carried out her beautiful and extravagant act. Did she pour that costly perfume over him because she had a deep devotion to him and love for him? It appears that no one made her do it. It was freely and extravagantly done. This perfume that cost a year's wages, poured out over his head. Not measured out carefully or sparingly, but poured, 'wasted'. It is a tender and daring act, unusual in the context, and deeply intimate. I would love to hear the woman's own words about this, about what stirred in her heart - but I suspect she wouldn't really be able to put it into words. This was a beautiful act of wordless devotion. She was clearly a woman whose heart had been profoundly touched and enflamed. And the reasons of the heart are often wordless.

What does her beautifully extravagant gesture say to us today? As I read this story and imagine the scene, I find the extravagant devotion of it utterly compelling. We need this kind of passion ourselves. Like this woman we need to fall in love. We need a heart that is devoted, loving, giving - and we need to give with abandon. Our world desperately needs this kind of passion. We don't need measured giving. We need to act with loving abandon. She was outrageously generous. This woman's act is still being told 2000 years later and it is a picture of great spiritual beauty. It is a spiritual beauty which mirrors God's beauty, for it mirrors God's extravagant self-giving love to the universe. Love, as we understand it in our Christian Tradition, can never be calculated, measured out carefully, sparingly. The woman in our story did not appear to ask herself, 'what is the least I can do'? Or, 'what is my duty'? This scene is lavish, wasteful, absurdly generous, and thus extraordinarily beautiful.

This woman compels us to ask ourselves: *Can we break open the alabaster jar of our lives?* Can we love and give ourselves with generous abandon - freely and extravagantly? To God and to others. All of Jesus' teachings invite us to this. We are told to go the extra mile when asked to go one; to forgive, not seven times, but seventy times seven; like the rich young man we are invited to sell all we have and follow Jesus; we are told that the measure we give is the measure we will receive, and that generosity will be rewarded with a full measure, pressed down and overflowing; and we are pointed to the poor widow who put all she had into the Temple treasury. There is no room in this invitation for a calculated and measured response, for after all, what might be our measuring stick? Jesus shows us the way to this extravagant giving of self. He lived it, never afraid to speak of abundant life for all, to challenge the measured and limiting customs of his day, inviting all who had ears to hear to move past familiar horizons. He died in this way too, as he refused to run away from the consequences of his words and actions which provoked the wrath and the fear of his opponents. His life was an offering to God and to



the world. And St Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, spoke of his own life being poured out as a libation, an offering to God.

*Break open the alabaster jar of our lives.*

In his work, *The Prophet*, the Lebanese philosopher and poet, Khalil Gibran, writes most beautifully about this kind of uncalculated extravagance:

“There are those who give little of the much which they have - and they give it for recognition and their hidden desire makes their gifts unwholesome.

And there are those who have little and give it all.

These are the believers in life and the bounty of life, and their coffer is never empty.

There are those who give with joy, and that joy is their reward.

And there are those who give with pain, and that pain is their baptism.

And there are those who give and know not pain in giving, nor do they seek joy, nor give with mindfulness of virtue.

They give as in yonder valley the myrtle breathes its fragrance into space.

Through the hands of such as these God speaks, and from behind their eyes God smiles upon the earth”.

*They give as in yonder valley the myrtle breathes its fragrance into space. The woman breaks her alabaster jar and pours out the costly perfume.* There is a gracious expansiveness in this. There is room for God to be God. In contrast to this graciousness there are those who live and love and give in a measured way. And in doing so they seem to close up on life, to shrink. In her novel, *The Stone Angel*, Margaret Laurence tells the story of Hagar Shipley, a woman who shrank more and more from life, who relentlessly refused the grace of the invitation to love and give of herself. This is Hagar’s story:

Hagar is the daughter of a store-keeper on the Canadian prairies. Her father is wealthier and more cultured than most of the other people in that area. Very early in her life, Hagar learns from her father to look with disdain on those less well-educated, less clear-headed and weaker than herself. She also learns to look down on weakness of all kinds, either within herself or others. The secret of life, as she learns it, is to be self-reliant, independent, never to cry and to be stronger than others. As she grows up, goes to an eastern finishing school and returns to help her father in his business, Hagar learns more and more to be in perfect control of herself, how to not feel anything: neither warmth nor sympathy for

others, nor weakness, nor loneliness, nor tears within herself. Her father considers her too cultured to mix with the local boys, but she rejects her father and eventually marries Bram Shipley, the most uncouth, unmannered, unfeeling and irreligious man in that area. But Hagar is so unfeeling she doesn't seem to even notice. She expects nothing from him or life and receives nothing. She is neither happy nor sad, neither depressed nor tearful, when her life degenerates progressively into nothing. Worst of all, she is totally uninterested in bettering it. Her father had rejected her when she married Bram, and now, living on his farm outside of town, she no longer even goes into town to shop or to go to church. She begins to neglect her physical appearance, and soon even begins, outwardly, to resemble the ragged Bram. She continues in this way for a meaningless twenty-four years. Then a particular jarring incident moves her to act and nearly to save herself.

After twenty-four years of semi-comatose existence, her physical appearance has degenerated considerably. One day she goes to town with her young son, John, to sell eggs. It is winter and she is dressed particularly shabbily in an old and oversize parka. She rings a doorbell at a well-to-do house and is greeted by a well-dressed young girl. The young girl calls her mother, saying, 'the egg woman is here'. The girl's mother turns out to be none other than one of Hagar's former school friends. Hagar, hearing herself called the egg woman by the offspring of her former school friend is prompted for the first time in years to take a real look at herself. Immediately upon leaving the house she goes to a public washroom and looks at herself in the mirror. The pain is searing. In this graced moment she is a mystery to herself: "I stood for a long time, looking, wondering how a person could change so much and never see it. So gradually it happens ... the face – a brown and leathery face that wasn't mine. Only the eyes were mine, staring as though to pierce the lying glass and get beneath to some truer image, infinitely distant".

At that moment she makes up her mind to leave her husband. She does this within a few days, taking her son with her. She goes to the West Coast, becomes a live-in housekeeper to a well-to-do widower and slowly regains her manners, cultured speech and physical appearance. But in no way does she ever regain her feelings. She suppresses her loneliness, never cries, and never allows herself to feel genuine warmth for another person. Throughout her life, she experiences moments that open up the possibility of genuine tenderness – for instance, when her son leaves to go overseas during the war. The moment calls for tenderness, for feeling, but Hagar, as always, manages to close the door just at the moment of *kairos*, the moment when God breaks through. She refuses to hug her son as he says good-bye. "I wanted all at once to hold him tightly, plead with him not to go, but I did not want to embarrass both of us nor have him think I'd taken leave of my senses".

This incident is typical of her whole life. As a result she goes through life believing it is a cruel trick, with really nothing to offer. Her inability to believe in the possibility of meaningful human contact and community also prevents her from believing in God. Her relationship with God is like her relationship with others and with life in general, a matter of profound indifference. Her last chance to seize life comes at her death. She is visited, on her deathbed, by her daughter-in-law's minister, and later, by her

son. When he first comes into the room, she greets the minister, with a mixture of pragmatism and indifference. She feels that he has nothing to offer, but she will be polite so as to get rid of him as easily as possible. He asks her whether he can pray over her. Initially, she refuses, but then, remembering a church hymn from her youth, she asks him to sing it. He consents and begins to sing the hymn. As he sings, the words of the song, coupled with her intuition of her impending death, spark a sensitive moment, a *Kairos* moment: *All people that on earth do dwell, sing to the Lord with joyful voice.*

And later she says: “I must always, always, always, have wanted that – simply to rejoice. How is it I never could? Every good joy I might have held, in my man or any child of mine or even the plain light of morning, of walking the earth, all were forced to stand still by some brake of proper appearances – oh, proper to whom? When did I ever speak the heart’s truth? I was alone, never anything else, and never free, for I carried my chains within me, and they spread out from me and shackled all I touched”.

However, just as in times past, Hagar resists redemption. She refuses to cry, to admit guilt, to reach out for help. Instead, after a brief graced moment, she withdraws back into her hardened self and misses redemption as it passes her by. The soil was moist, the rain had come, the sun was warming the fertile land, but she refused to drop the seed. Her last opportunity for redemptive tears comes just before her death, when her son comes to see her. He lingers awkwardly at her bedside, and she senses that he wants a final reconciliation with her. She feigns tenderness and reaches out to him, but underneath her heart remains aloof. She lies to get rid of him and thus, even on her deathbed, is unable to reach a moment of genuine warmth and togetherness. So she dies as she had lived, aloof from life, from herself, her needs, her heart, from others, and from God. Expecting nothing and receiving nothing.

This is a sad, tragic story, for we see a woman relentlessly refusing life. Her relationship with God is like her relationship with others and with life in general, a matter of profound indifference: *Hagar lived aloof from life, from herself, her needs, her heart, from others and from God. Expecting nothing and receiving nothing!* How vastly different from the few lines we have in the Gospels of the woman who loved with abandon. *Throughout her life, she experiences moments that open up the possibility of genuine tenderness* - but she is unable to go there, she closes up. *The soil was moist, the rain had come, the sun was warming the fertile land, but she refused to drop the seed.* All around us and offered to us, moment by moment, are possibilities for throwing ourselves wholeheartedly into life, loving with abandon and giving extravagantly.

*Break open the alabaster jar of our lives.*

It’s often not fashionable these days to speak of giving ourselves utterly - it is no longer held up as virtuous. Most of the time we hear the language of self-preservation and the praise of a measured giving that puts us and our needs first. Perhaps this is the result of our lives being so busy and full – like an overpacked suitcase – that we turn to self-preservation rather than



self-abandon. There are times of course, when we do need to withdraw, to nourish ourselves and be renewed and re-energized, but that is not the same as living life in a calculated and measured way, or refusing to be drawn into life, to be touched, to feel, to love and give. In our Christian spiritual tradition we are presented with this paradox, that in giving we receive, that those who hold on to their life will lose it and those who lose their life will find it. And the most inspiring people, I find, are still those who break open the jar of their lives, in dedication and extravagant love - love of God and love of others. No wonder that woman's story is still being told today!

And this week, Refugee Week, we must ask ourselves: Am I the woman with the alabaster jar? Or am I Hagar? Dare I break open my life and pour it out as an offering in love? And if I dare to do that, what might that mean as I look upon the great tide of hurting humanity in search of a home, turning to my home, to our home, Australia?

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