Sermon on John 12:1-8 (Preparation for Jesus’ Death)

Though I’m sure there are exceptions in this room, the line that seems to stick out for Westerners from today’s gospel is “you always have the poor with you.”

Conservatives have interpreted it as the “Adam Smith Jesus” recognizing the economic realities of life; Adam Smith, you’ll recall was the author of the book basically credited with founding modern capitalism *The Wealth of Nations*

Those of a more socialist bent have interpreted it as a root problem with Christianity; Jesus here not nearly radical enough for the world’s real problems.

That’s our time, but for many centuries the most influential portion of this story, the part that stuck out, was the act that took place at the dinner, “Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume!”

And what an influence! Taking Jewish precedents around the grandeur of the temple, but supremely Mary’s example here, the poor and the rich poured out a vast torrent of wealth in devotion to Jesus the fruit of which has been a combination of soaring architecture, awe-inspiring music and stunning visual art that is collectively much of the beauty of Western Civilization.

Jesus has come to the home of Lazarus, the man he raised to life; the family is hosting a dinner in Jesus’ honour; what do you serve to the man who has raised your brother from the dead?

They wouldn’t have had the full culinary repertoire of classic French cooking, so vividly on display at the White House this past Thursday when the Prime Minister and President, families and guests were served Alaskan halibut casseroles, roasted apricot galette, baby lamb chops with Yukon Gold potato dauphinoise (doffeenwas) and a maple pecan cake with cocoa nib wafer and butterscotch swirl ice cream.

But you can bet they put on a wonderful Middle Eastern feast featuring lamb, spices, wine and something wonderfully honeyed for dessert; they would have wanted the very best for the Rabbi who had done the impossible.

John’s depiction of the scene is true to the characters he’s been developing.

Martha, of course, is serving; it’s her personality; she’s the practical one; she’s the one who had come out of the house upon Jesus’ arrival earlier when Lazarus had died, telling him to his face “if you had been here my brother wouldn’t have died.”

On that previous occasion, Mary, broken by a pain, can’t face Jesus until he’s in the house and then she too says “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” But she did so kneeling at his feet.

And so it doesn’t surprise us that now, in celebration and gratefulness, Martha is serving and that Mary is kneeling in devotion at Jesus’ feet!

What a provocative scene or should I say scent! Scientists tell us that odor is closely tied to our memory center; to this day when I smell beef borsht I’m back to bounding up the back stairs, a young boy, ready to eat, my mother ladling out the soup or cutting the bread.

Smell is one of those things you can’t really conjure up in the mind; it’s immediate; though tied to memory, smells themselves don’t seem recallable outside of actually experiencing them.

In a culture with no proper sewage system, where the only way to get rid of garbage is to burn it, strong unpleasant smells are a part of daily life; the smell of expensive perfume a rare event.

So when the smell fills the room, the people there would have been in awe, possibly recalling experiences in the temple, possibly, for those fortunate enough, a lavish banquet or wedding.

And in a culture where bathing was much rarer than today, this powerful smell would have lingered; lingered on Mary’s hair for days and weeks; lingered on Jesus’ body for the next six days before he died, maybe on the cross and in the tomb.

Was it still there when he was raised into his new existence? His scars were, maybe the scent was too.

But there is someone in the scene that doesn’t get it and at first blush who can blame him!

The costly ointment that Mary pours on a part of Jesus that will just as soon be sullied with dust is probably the equivalent of her inheritance; she certainly can’t afford to do this!

Wouldn’t it make better sense to spend your inheritance on a legacy that makes a difference in people’s lives; especially in the lives of oppressed Jewish peasants!?

Even putting aside John’s attribution of a thievery motive, which isn’t echoed in the other gospels, I wonder if Judas doesn’t speak for many of us, or maybe our society?

In a world with so many troubles; where so many are oppressed; how can such a lavish act be justified? Indeed on the surface of it really does seem a waste; even antithetical to Christ himself!

Would we have served Mother Teresa the same food Trudeau and Obama dined on the other night? It would have been unseemly, no?

To extend the critique, Isn’t it true that St. Peter’s was built on the backs of the poor? On their indulgences? Isn’t that why we had that great event that changed the world, the Reformation? Isn’t that why there’s an Anglican church?

What about the 8 million dollars raised to upgrade our cathedral? What about the hundreds of thousands our own diocese is pouring into St. Matthew over the past 5 years?

What is the justification of such an approach? Is it necessary?

Indeed, the Church has said, not only is it necessary; it’s actually part of our mission and vision! When the church celebrates beauty born of devotion to Christ it is not compromising but expressing a vision of humanity that is central to our scriptures and to the vision of a God who *is* Beauty, ever ancient ever new!

This is brought out most clearly when we look at what it means to remove beauty born of devotion from the human equation: you get the endless gray functionalism of the former Soviet Union, formally atheist;

you get towns that approve any and all strip malls and industrial parks that will increase property taxes without regard to designs that feature beauty;

you get families that rush past each other, acts of devotion, like the giving of a red rose, just because, long forgotten;

or spending 90 minutes preparing a good Sunday roast as frivolous sounding as a Kardashian reality episode.

I’m not pining for the past, because every age has had it’s own struggles with balance; I get the modern world, our lifestyle is different now. I also recognize that it’s a stretch to connect some of these dots.

 What I want to say is that extravagant worship is not contradictory to social justice; it might yet be the reason our lives find a true balance, that our faith communities find their centre once again.

I’m only saying what the Church has always said, or at least when she is speaking most coherently: reflecting God means winding together a threefold cord: beauty, truth and goodness.

We are a community that has as a basic vision statement: helping each other explore God’s beauty, truth and goodness

We do so because we are serious about truly helping! If we desire to help the poor, for instance; if we desire to make the world a better place, we will marry a concern for the practical (Martha) with deep and extravagant devotion (Mary).

When Jesus says that the poor you will always have but you won’t always have me, he’s not selfishly drawing attention to himself; he’s not saying you can’t do anything for the poor so don’t worry about them;

he’s not saying just focus on worship and beauty, just devote yourself to me in your private mystical prayers

No, like the Great Commandment itself which ties together Love of God and love of neighbour, Jesus is signalling that genuine devotion to him might just keep us in touch with a deep and genuine concern for the poor.

In terms of Lent, if Jesus is the rejected One, the supreme Victim, than, in his Resurrection we are given the courage and insight to empathize creatively for all victims

And that truly is the good news of this text. Because Jesus not only brings life to Lazarus; he is alive and is bringing life to us in this room!

When we find that our lives start to make better sense; when they find new courage to live the love of God in their families and work places we want to say thanks to the living Christ.

Ask the Cancer agencies in our country who gives the most money; its people directly affected or their families. People give to that which genuinely helps them or those closest to them!

We are a community that welcomes difficult social justice questions, maybe more so because at the same time our source of joy, insight is here at this feast, pouring himself out for us; the scent filling our lives, changing our lives, evoking memories of what we might yet become!