

# The Aroma of Grace in Us

## John 12:1-8

The fragrance of the nard, the expensive perfume, filled the house as Mary anointed Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair. Is it a waste? 300 days worth of wages it was! Is it waste? Is it poor stewardship? Should it have been used elsewhere? Or is this extravagant act of Mary a living out of her faith in Jesus?

What do you say?

Let's pray...

Here we gather and dwell in the Word in the home of Lazarus, the one whom Jesus has just raised from the dead (and remember how John very pointedly records just a few verses earlier in the gospel that 'Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to Jesus, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.") The foul smell of death will soon be replaced by the beautiful aroma of life anew.

That smell of life fills the house as Mary anoints Jesus for his forthcoming death. For in this death, Jesus will bring that aroma of life to fill the whole earth for all who receive him in faith.

And that is what Mary does here. In faith she takes a huge risk... a huge step of faith in anointing Jesus. She takes risks:

- In wiping Jesus' feet with her hair, the act of unbinding her hair as she does is something that no self-respecting keeper of Jewish law would have done. But Mary does what it takes in an act of faith, in the presence of Jesus.
- She uncorks the very best of nard, an expensive perfume, to anoint Jesus, preparing him for his burial. This is an extravagant and humble act of devotion in the presence of the extravagant giver of the life-giving aroma of grace and life — Jesus, who will give his life for the world.

There is a place for the extravagance of faith — for the impulsive and the planned acts, extravagant act of mercy, kindness, and generosity in response to God's presence and God's life for me.

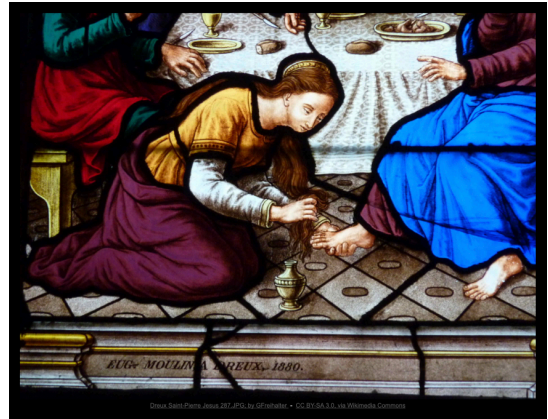
What is  
our response  
to God with us?



What about you? What about me? What is our response to God with us? Are we prepared to take risks? Are we able to respond with such an extravagance of faith?

When I reflected on Mary's humble but extravagant act, it reminded me of a Danish story from the mid 19th century which was made into a movie in the 1980s. Its called *Babette's Feast*. Do you know it?

Whilst it's not a specifically Christian story, and it is interpreted in various ways and depths, it is at one level, a story of pure extravagant grace.



The story takes place in a tiny, remote, fictional town originally set in Norway, although moved to Denmark for the movie.

Central to the story are two sisters, Martine and Philippa, the daughters of a pious village mid-19th century pastor. Martine and Philippa are faithful and pious too, and very loyal to their father. He is overly protective, and expects them to serve him and the community. The sisters never marry, and continue their lives of serving after the pastor dies.

Along comes Babette expectantly. She comes to them in great fear and need, at the recommendation of a man who had previously fallen in love with one of the sisters but who had been turned away. Babette tells the sisters that she has nowhere to turn. Her husband and son have been shot in the violence of the civil war taking place in France, and she is also in mortal danger.

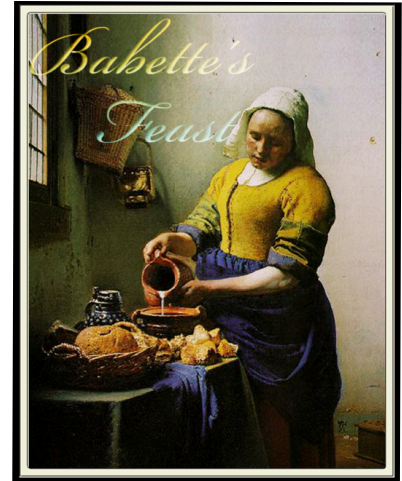
Babette asks for the sisters help, saying she would work for them. But they have no money to pay her. She offers to work for lodging and food, and the sisters agree.

Twelve years pass in harmony, and Babette rarely referred to her life in France.

One day, though, she mentions that she has a French lottery ticket that a friend has been renewing for her each year, hoping that one day she might win the grand prize of ten thousand francs.

The centenary of the sister's father's birth approaches, and the sisters plan to do something in honour of their father's memory, and to include the townspeople who had been among his small flock of congregants. Ever fewer in number, ageing, cranky, and harbouring long-held grudges amongst themselves, the prospect was daunting.

As their father's hundredth birthday grew closer, Babette receives a letter from France, the first she'd received in all the time she had lived in the village. And voila! She had won the ten thousand francs from the lottery ticket she had so long held out hope for!



Birds will return to their nests  
and human beings  
to the country of their birth.

The news spread, and all the townspeople were convinced that Babette would return to France. "Birds will return to their nests and human beings to the country of their birth."

The entire town lamented what they feared would be Babette's imminent departure, for they loved her. The sisters dreaded the prospect most of all, and wondered if Babette would at least remain with them through to their father's birthday.

To their amazement, Babette approaches the sisters for a favour, imploring them to allow her to cook the dinner for the birthday celebration. The sisters, not having intended to serve more than a plain dinner, were taken aback. But they relented.

There was just one more detail, though — Babette wished to pay for the dinner out of her lottery winnings. The sisters protested, but Babette insisted, saying that in all the twelve years she had served them, she'd never asked for any other favour. And so, consent was given.

Babette embarked on a journey, telling the sisters that she needed leave of a week to ten days to make preparations and buy goods for the celebration. In due time, she returned, and shortly thereafter, the goods she had purchased arrived in the village.

Wheelbarrow-loads of fine wine begin to arrive at the little house, along with all manner of fine ingredients for a feast.

The day of the feast finally arrives. The guests begin to arrive. The table, covered in fine linen and laden with polished plates and multiple glasses, greets them.

A young lad assists Babette, serving one course after another of the most exquisitely prepared dishes. Wines were decanted, glasses kept full. The elderly celebrants, who usually spurned anything but the simplest of foods, were largely silent, eating and drinking everything that was put before them, course after abundant course.

But rather than grow heavy, the atmosphere lightens.

And more importantly, as they ate and drank, miracles start to occur. Old grudges were forgiven, rifts were

healed, and

“time itself had merged into eternity.” The Pastor’s daughters and the townspeople experienced something that words were inadequate to describe. Babette’s feast was not only an incredible success, but something of a miracle of grace.

As the guests finished, Babette herself was exhausted. She had given her all, both financially and physically.

And what about her? Was she going to return to France, as all feared? “No”. Her home was here.

People in the town had assumed that Babette would return to France a wealthy woman. However, they learn something amazing. Babette was formerly the chef at one of Paris’ finest restaurants, Café Anglais, and that the actual price of the meal she prepared was 10,000 francs. She had invested all her prize money, and all of herself, into serving the villagers the finest of fare.

The extravagance of grace in this meal brings miraculous change in the lives of those who receive it.

Jesus will soon go from Mary’s home to the place of the Last Supper... and then to the place where he gives his all, he gives up his very life for you and me in our little village... our world and all people in it. Here is the extravagance of God in love and forgiveness; the overflowing grace of God, from a cross of sacrifice exchanging the stench of death for the sweet aroma and taste of life.



Time itself had merged into eternity



Taste and see that the Lord is good (Psalm 34):

“Come,” Jesus says, “for my table is laid and all is made ready for you today.”

How will you respond?

Holy Week, with the journey to the cross and the gift of sacrificial love, beckon soon now.

How do you respond? Was Mary’s an act of reckless waste? Or was it something other? Something more? An extravagant response, a risky response of faith in thanks for the gift of life?

How do you and I respond? How will you respond to Jesus? How will you live in faith with others?

Paul writes in 2 Cor 2:14:

“But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him.”

For we, we are the aroma of Christ. Amen.

Video of the service including the above address: <https://youtu.be/te8wDwVeNcM>

