

Sermon for 6th April 2025, Year C, Lent 5

Preached at St John's Baillieston

John 12:1-8

Sermon

I once heard a story about a church conference in America where the theme was generosity and fundraising. One speaker talked about what it meant to offer a gift directly to God, and already most of the clergy were yawning. Then he pulled a \$100 bill from his wallet, set it on fire, and prayed "Lord I offer this gift to you and to you alone".

You can probably imagine the reaction. People sat uncomfortably as the money went up in smoke as if it were incense or perfume. Some muttered that it was surely illegal to burn currency. Others wanted to know, since he clearly had money to literally burn, whether he could spare some for their roof project? And some couldn't help but wonder how much food it might have bought for the food bank.

But the speaker persisted. "Don't you understand? I am offering this money as a sacrifice to God, and therefore it must become useless to the rest of us."

Most of us are not comfortable with this sort of gift, that seems to have no purpose. We're often suspicious of it. If someone writes a cheque for ten thousand pounds for the church, our first thought would probably be, 'what do they want in exchange for this?' or perhaps, 'what are they going to want us to spend it on?'

I remember back in Cornwall, a wealthy lady had written a substantial cheque for one of our churches, but when the Vestry realised that she wanted them to

spend it on removing the old pews and replacing them with comfortable chairs, they sent the cheque back with a firm 'no thank you'.

Other people's gift-giving can quickly expose our hidden thoughts and feelings about them and their suspected motives. A gift with no strings attached is so rare that we are always suspicious, looking for the ulterior motive.

Judas Iscariot is clearly offended by the expensive gift that Mary wastes on Jesus. He claims the perfume was worth 300 denarii, which was nearly a year's wages for a typical working man. To put it in today's terms, you might think of a church member bringing out a vintage bottle of whisky worth twenty thousand pounds and pouring it out for the priest to enjoy after the service. Who among us would not question this gift and wonder if there might not have been more worthwhile uses of such largesse?

"What about the poor?" someone will say. "What about the people of Gaza?" "What about the Refuweegee Lent charity?" "Surely this magnificent bottle could have been sold and the money put to some better use, like repairing the roof at St John's?" We cannot comprehend a pure gift that does nothing productive and asks for nothing in return. We just don't trust it. It's a waste.

In the last dozen years we've invented a new word to describe how Judas complains about Mary's gift. We call it 'whataboutism'. It's like when someone argues that "we should allow refugees and asylum seekers to work and claim benefits," and someone else says "but what about poor British people? Surely charity begins at home?"

At some level these criticisms have validity. When a charity or individual requests we donate to them, can't we reasonably question whether there might be more worthy recipients, or more worthy goals?

But often the 'what about' question comes not from a place of humble critique, but self-righteousness, and this is why Jesus pushes back against Judas's apparent

care for the poor. Judas doesn't really care for the poor, the bible tells us, he's just using a self-righteous 'but what about' argument because he wanted the wealth for himself, or at least he wanted the wealth to be under his control, to be used for his purposes. He probably expects Jesus and the other disciples to agree with him, given their ministry so far. To put it in modern terms, he's virtue-signalling, trying to prove he's one of the good guys, when his true motives are considerably more selfish.

'Whataboutism' is an effective way to do this. We may have only just invented the word, but it has been going on for millennia. If you don't approve of someone else's generosity, or you feel guilty because they're giving something, and you don't want to, simply point out that the money should have been spent on someone or something else, and then retire to a safe distance in smug self-righteousness.

The sad result of this mentality is often that fewer people give anything at all. People become paralysed with indecision. Should I give to a homeless person or to a housing charity? Should I give to support refugees, or food banks? Should I support the church at all when I have no idea what they spend it on? Maybe I'll just leave it until some other day.

Criticism of those who want to be charitable discourages those who are generous. This is why Jesus immediately calls Judas out on it. "Leave her alone," he says. She bought the perfume specifically for this purpose, to be an extravagant gift, because she knows that Jesus is going to die.

Mary, of course, has good reason to be so extravagant in her giving. In the previous chapter, we heard how Jesus had raised Mary's brother Lazarus from the dead after four days in the tomb. If Jesus had raised *your* beloved family member from the dead, you might also feel that a gift worth a year's wages was entirely reasonable, especially a gift that cannot be sold on or subsequently given away like an unwanted Christmas present.

In this scene, Mary says nothing, but her actions say everything about how she feels. She has given a gift to God with no strings attached, and the only objective in her mind is to show her love and gratitude to the one who changed her life. This is true, innocent generosity. Judas's feigned generosity to the poor on the other hand, starts to look rather ugly, calculated, and self-serving.

Before I finish, we must however address those final words of Jesus. "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." If you're not careful, you could read this as Jesus saying giving to the poor is futile, as there's always more of them. And sometimes parts of the Christian Church have used this to justify their glorious gold-plated cathedrals and grand worship auditoriums, and friendships with kings and princes and political leaders. 'We're just like Mary,' they say, 'giving our expensive gifts to God.' 'Don't be like Judas,' they say, 'telling us we should have given our wealth uselessly to the poor!'

But Jesus isn't saying don't give to the poor. He's actually referring to two verses in Deuteronomy where God says, "Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do it... Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land.'".

God says there will always be some in need on the earth, *therefore* give to the poor. He's not saying, "you can't fix poverty so don't bother trying".

And it's not an either/or thing. Judas wants to argue that Mary's gift is wasteful and bad, and only giving to the poor (or to his own money pouch) is good. But Jesus says all gifts are good when they are done with love, with no strings attached, and no desire to get anything back.

Mary may have wasted a year's wages on Jesus, but she knows the true value of what Jesus has done for her, and will shortly do for the whole of humanity. She therefore gave him the most valuable thing she had. I don't mean the perfume. I mean her heart.