

## [John 12:1-8](#)

You don't have to be around my family long to find those of us who are passionate about photography. My daughter and I share a love for it, and it all began with my late father. He wanted to document his time doing National Service with the RAF and got the bug there. Belatedly, at the age of 21, I caught it off him. In his later years, few things gave him greater pleasure when we were with him than seeing our daughter's latest photos.

So when Dad died, one of the things we spent some money from his estate on was a family portrait session at a studio we knew of in a nearby village. After the session, Debbie and I returned to the studio a week or two later to choose the photos we wanted.

But it wasn't just about choosing the photos: we also had to pick frames for them from a selection we were offered. Some choices were easier than others: a portrait of our dog, who is predominantly black in colour, was paired with a black frame. It wasn't always as straightforward as that, as we considered both the content of the photo and the colour of the wall where it would hang.

Our reading today has a frame. At the top and the bottom, the beginning and the end, we find the Cross of Christ. We have it in the beginning with the reference 'Six days before the Passover' (verse 1). For in chapter 19, as the Passover lambs die, so too will Jesus (John 19:14), the Lamb of God (John 1:29). Then near the end, Jesus says that Mary anointed him for his burial (verse 7). Who knows, perhaps she took what was left of the perfume she used here to the tomb.

The Cross frames our story. What Jesus has recently done for the siblings Lazarus, Martha, and Mary by raising Lazarus from the dead (verse 1) will be ratified by the Cross. Ultimately, it is the source of all our blessings.

And within that frame, we see in Lazarus, Martha, and Mary fitting responses to all that Jesus has done for them. The brother and his two sisters are all here examples of responding to the grace of God. They are examples of true disciples.

So in what ways do they respond to Jesus, and what can we learn from them?

**Martha** is first up in the text. John writes of her, 'Martha served' (verse 2).

This is very different in tone from Luke's story of Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38-42), where we read that Martha was 'distracted by serving'. Here it's

different. She is serving as her way of playing a part in honouring Jesus with this dinner.

Jesus had raised Lazarus back to life with no pre-conditions, but here is the natural response of someone like Martha. What can she do in gratitude? She can serve Jesus. On the surface it's just a meal, but in John's Gospel where even the most literal things are also symbolic, we see here an important spiritual principle for all of us.

We too have freely received from Jesus without any preconditions. He went to the Cross for us and offered us the forgiveness of sins. We owe him everything – and we cannot pay it. But we can offer to serve him in grateful response for all he has done for us. If we truly count our blessings we don't merely end up writing a religious shopping list. Instead the cumulative effect of all those blessings is for us to say, 'How can we show our gratitude?'

Serving Jesus is an obvious way to show our gratitude for the Cross and all it contains. And so we ask questions in prayer: 'What do you need me to do, Lord? What would please you?'

Sometimes it will be obvious what we can do. There will be a presenting need. At other times we need to wait and seek God in prayer to know how he would like us to serve him. When the answer comes, it may be something we find pleasing or it may be something we find difficult.

It comes back to the Covenant Service, doesn't it? 'Christ has many services to be done. Some are easy, others are hard.' For me, responding to the call to ministry was part of my way of serving Jesus in response to all he has done. Sometimes it's rewarding and thrilling, but on other occasions it's dull, depressing, or even frightening. But I carry on because this is a way in which Christ has shown me (and the Church) that I can serve him in response to his great love for me.

Can each of us name ways in which we are called to serve Christ in response to his grace and mercy to us?

**Lazarus** is next. 'Lazarus was among those reclining at table with [Jesus]' (verse 2)

'Reclining at table'? Put out of your mind a typical dining table. In particular, stop thinking about Leonardo da Vinci's painting of the Last Supper, where it

looks like Jesus and the disciples are sitting down to a meal in the way we would.

Instead, remember that a Middle Eastern table was close to the floor. In order to eat, you would lie with your head near the table and your legs away, supporting yourself on your left elbow while using your right hand to take food. That is what 'reclining at table' was like.

And the point here isn't that Lazarus is lazily enjoying the food and the company while the women slave in a hot kitchen. It's more that this is a picture of intimacy. Perhaps on a day when we celebrate Holy Communion, intimacy at a meal table has special significance.

And so again, we have a response to what Jesus has done here. Jesus has brought his friend Lazarus back to life. In response, Lazarus wants to get close to him. You can imagine that Lazarus will be getting to know his friend Jesus better as they eat together.

We too can draw near to Jesus in response to all the wonderful things he has done for us. Don't we want to know someone like that better? This is why we pray. This is why we read our Bibles. This is why we gather for worship. This is why we eat in his presence, not only in ordinary meals but also at the Lord's Supper. It's all about getting to know better the One who has been so full of love for us, sinners that we are.

Sometimes when a preacher reminds us to pray, read our Bibles, worship, and take the sacraments it sounds like a sergeant-major barking orders. But that isn't the reason for doing these things. All these so-called 'means or grace' (or in other traditions 'spiritual disciplines') are there as ways of coming close to Jesus.

So I'm not going to harangue you today about your personal devotions. But I am going to say this: let's ponder all that Jesus has done for us, and let that motivate us to use the means he has provided to come close to him.

Finally, the star of the show (well, apart from Jesus, of course): **Mary**. We know how Mary responds to all Jesus has done for her, Martha, and Lazarus:

Then Mary took about half a litre of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.  
(Verse 3)

If Martha responds by serving and Lazarus by intimacy, then Mary responds by giving. Her giving is generous and perhaps sacrificial. But it is so beautiful that 'the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.'

That's what true giving from the heart to Jesus in response to his love is like. There is a beauty about it. Mary is not paying a tax. Nor is she settling a bill. She is responding from the heart to the grace and mercy of Jesus. And everyone present can smell the fragrance.

Not only that, but we can also say her giving is prophetic. In the next chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus will wash his disciples' feet. But Jesus' own feet don't get a wash. Not that he needed to be washed clean of sin, of course. But his feet have already been washed here by Mary, who has anointed him for burial (verse 7) after the Cross.

The one who doesn't understand this is Judas, whom John tells us is a taker to the point of being a thief (verses 4-6) rather than a giver.

Now when Christians give, we do not ultimately give to the church, we give to Jesus. When we give, we do not pay a subscription that entitles us to benefits from the church, we give as an act of gratitude and worship because Jesus has done so much for us and our lives are framed by his Cross. Some of you will recall that's why I never refer to 'the collection' in a service: I talk about 'the offering.'

I know I'm saying this at a time when giving of the financial kind is especially hard. Inflation is at its worst for thirty years and is poised to get worse; and on Friday we saw our energy bills leap by 54%.

But nevertheless we can ask the general question about giving. And we ask it not in a way that is designed to inflict guilt on people: rather, we say, have we truly taken into our hearts and minds the lavish and outrageous grace of God in Christ who went to the Cross for us? Have we caught a vision of just how much God loves us? In gratitude, what can we give of our money, time, talents, possessions, indeed of our very lives?

Can we make the atmosphere fragrant with the scent of our giving?

**So** – Passion Sunday, when we start to see that the Cross of Jesus frames not just this reading but our whole lives: can we sense how broad and deep and high the love of God for us is in Christ?

And if we can, then like Martha can we show our gratitude in serving, like Lazarus can we show our love in drawing close to Jesus, and like Mary can we demonstrate our response to that love in generous giving?