



St Marylebone  
Parish Church

## Passion Sunday 2025

*John 12.1 – 8*

### **The Fragrance of Love**

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

All four Gospels speak of Jesus being anointed.

For some scholars, the four anointing stories come from four separate events, for others, all are versions of the same story.

As with all the stories we hear read to us from the gospels, each gospel writer carefully selects and moulds his version of Jesus' ministry to suit a particular audience, to bring out specific emphasis or nuance which would have related to those for whom the evangelist set down their record of Jesus' life.

John's telling of the story is set six days before the greatest of all the Jewish feasts – Passover.

It is set in Bethany, the home of Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha and in John's telling of the story, it is Mary, the sister of Lazarus and Martha, who squanders a whole pot of precious nard on Jesus' feet and then wipes it off with her hair.

Nard was a very important perfume in the ancient world. It was difficult to harvest and prepare from the ground-up roots of Spikenard, a flowering plant in the honeysuckle family, which

grows in the Himalayas of Nepal, China, and India. Loved by the Egyptians, the Greeks, and the Romans, Nard had a deep, rich, earthy, woody aroma with hints of musk and spice. A potful cost the same as a whole year's wages, and it was used not only as a perfume, but for embalming.

For John, as with nearly all his stories, the anointing of Jesus in Bethany points to the Cross of Calvary, the place where God's glory will be fully and uniquely revealed in the Crucifixion of Jesus. The meal that Jesus' shares in Lazarus' home is, like every meal in John's Gospel, a reference to the Last Supper, the Holy Communion.

So, the anointing which takes in Bethany, prepares Jesus for his burial, something which was hurried and rushed and took place without the traditional washing and anointing with oils and perfumes because it was almost the Sabbath.

The presence of Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead, proclaims the triumph of Jesus' Resurrection.

Jesus' inexorable journey to the cross and the tomb - and beyond - could not be set out any more clearly. Nor could Judas' reaction to this beautiful yet squanderous act, be any clearer. He who acted as treasurer to the disciples, but was a thief, was outraged and, indeed, there are many scholars who have speculated whether this act of seeming waste was for Judas the last straw, the tipping point, which led him to betray Jesus to the High Priest.

Mary of Bethany takes a pot of enormously costly perfume and anoints the feet of Jesus before wiping them dry with her hair. As the late Pope Benedict XVI wrote<sup>i</sup>, here, in this single act, "the logic of love clashed with the logic of profit" and the house of Lazarus,

which in John's scheme stands for the House of the Redeemed, the Church, is filled with the fragrance of love.

St Augustine, commenting on this passage of John's Gospel wrote<sup>ii</sup> that, as the house was filled with the fragrance [of love], so the world is filled with the fame of a good character: for a good character is like a sweet scent ... and through good works, the name of the Lord is honoured. What *we* do for Jesus, is prefigured in that sweet perfume, lavished on Jesus, which not only fills the Church but the whole world!

Mary of Bethany's act of generously spending herself without reserve, stands not only as testament to her great love and devotion to Jesus, but as an invitation to all Christians to spend themselves prodigally, without reserve, in doing Christ's will and proclaiming the Cross and the Resurrection in word and deed.

As we enter this Passiontide and prepare ourselves for Palm Sunday, Holy Week and Easter, may we respond to Mary of Bethany's invitation and recommit ourselves to filling the world with the fragrance of love.

Teach us, good Lord, to serve thee as thou deservest; to give, and not to count the cost, to fight, and not to heed the wound, to toil, and not to seek for rest, to labour, and not to ask for any reward, save that of knowing that we do thy will<sup>iii</sup>.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Homily of his Holiness Benedict XVI, 2 April 2007

<sup>ii</sup> Cf. In Io. Evang. tr. 50, 7

<sup>iii</sup> Prayer of Ignatius of Loyola