

The passionate life

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

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John 12.1-8.

Imagine for a moment a high-stakes card game in a casino—poker, most likely; the sort of thing you might see in a James Bond movie. All the other players are out; only the hero and his opponent are left. Raise after raise, the stakes get higher and higher. Then our hero pushes all his chips into the centre of the table and the cards are revealed. Everything is at stake. The risk is huge.

There was a lot at stake for Mary in today's gospel story—and just not the price of an incredibly expensive box of perfume, worth about a year's wages. She risked everything—her reputation, her future.

In those days a woman should certainly not come into a dining room where men were guests of her brother, unless it were merely to serve the food. Certainly she should not let down her hair. Mary's behaviour would have been seen as most unseemly.

Why did Mary go to such an extreme and act so passionately?

Jesus and his disciples were the dinner guests of Lazarus and, through him, his sisters Martha and Mary. This was shortly after Jesus had raised Lazarus from death.

In first century Jewish society it was very difficult for a woman to live without a husband or male relative nearby, even though she may have had money. It was difficult for a woman to buy and sell, and almost impossible for her to earn a decent and respectable living except under the headship of a man.

Jesus loved the family of Lazarus, Martha and Mary and he was deeply shaken by Lazarus' death. By restoring Lazarus to life, Jesus also restored to his sisters much of their social, economic and religious life.

So Mary—and Martha—had reason to be grateful to Jesus.

In response, Mary put everything on the line: money, reputation, self-respect, the lot. She risked rejection, not just by the other men, but by Jesus himself. She broke open the perfume box, and she broke social convention.

Mary insisted on an opportunity to minister and to receive ministry, even though she was a woman. Does that sound familiar?

What gave Mary the conviction, the motivation to act so boldly?

Jesus said of Mary that she had bought the perfume to keep for the day of his burial. It seems that Mary knew something of Jesus' destiny. In some prophetic way, she knew whom he was and what he was about to do.

On an earlier occasion, Mary had sat at Jesus' feet, listening to his words. There, too, she had recognised that he was special, that his words were words of life.

Mary was grateful to Jesus, yes. But she was also passionate *about* him and passionate *towards* him, for she knew who he was and something of what that meant.

This story from John's Gospel encourages us to be passionate in our response to Jesus Christ. To be passionate is to be capable of strong feelings, strong emotions. It means expressing strong feelings and emotions. It means being ardent, committed, 'full-on' as we say.

The season of Lent invites us to curb our less worthy passions, our ungodly emotions. But the Christ-like life is not emotion-free. Jesus wept. Jesus became angry.

We're grateful that we don't have to leave our minds at the door when we come to church. Neither should we leave our emotions outside. God seeks all of our life and being and a passionate participation in life.

When Mary poured perfume on Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair she treated him with great honour. Usually the feet of an honoured guest would be washed and perhaps the guest's head anointed with a dab of perfume. Here, Mary abased herself to anoint Jesus' *feet* with the perfume, and lots of it. She used not a cloth, but her very hair, the crowning glory of her head.

I wonder if Mary knew the words from Isaiah:

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.' (Isaiah 52.7)

After Mary poured out the perfume, the house was filled with its fragrance. Passion for God fills the church—God's house—with perfume, with sweetness and beauty.

Think of almost any of the early saints that we honour today, think of missionaries that we honour, the preachers and teachers whom we respect. They're people who were passionate about their calling, about God, about Jesus Christ; the fragrance of their service perfumes the church.

Many of us yearn to dedicate ourselves passionately to things that are worthwhile, to things that are godly, to a vocation, to God's call in our lives.

This does not have to mean travelling to the furthest corner of the earth, or joining a monastery, or selling everything.

Nor does it mean being noisily or outwardly emotive.

It *does* mean being utterly wholehearted, passionate and committed to the things that we do and the person that God is calling us to be. It's similar to what the Benedictines call attentiveness—giving complete wholehearted attention to the things at hand and God's presence in all creation.

If that's not possible where we are right now, with the life and commitments we have now, it might mean making some changes.

Perhaps we are being challenged to do something differently, or to take on something new.

Yet, for very many of us, the place of our calling and passionate life is right where we are, in the things of the here and now.

No matter what our lives, who we are, whatever we are being and doing as God guides us—no matter how seemingly routine—the story of Mary and the perfume challenges us to live passionately, fully, wholeheartedly, with God's help.

In every good thing, let's challenge ourselves to love and serve the Lord with all our heart ... and with all our soul ... and with all our mind ... and with all our strength—for that *is* the first and greatest commandment.