



Living Generously

Seven reflections on
Mary anointing Jesus' feet

Jonathan Farnhill



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'Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair.'

John 12:3

Foreword

Jesus stands watching people put gifts into the treasury in Luke 21. The person he commends is the poor widow who puts in two small copper coins. It is not the amount we give in cash terms which is important but what that gift is worth to us. Out of this woman's poverty, she has put in all she has to live on. The original Greek says: 'She has put in her very life.'

There are many ways in which God is generous to us and we are generous to God. The story of Mary anointing Jesus is a story of a generous response to a generous God. In these reflections, Jonathan explores these different aspects of generosity in a deep and powerful way. I warmly commend these studies.



The Rt Revd Steven Croft
Bishop of Oxford

Introduction

The story of Mary anointing Jesus' feet is just one verse amidst over 30,000 in the Bible. But in this verse there is so much for us to learn and so much to be inspired by. Put simply, in this one verse Mary shows us how to live a generous life.

The story is told slightly differently in the gospels of Matthew and Mark, and it is only in John's gospel that Mary is mentioned by name, but the essence of the story is the same. It is a remarkable, generous and loving act, one that continues to inspire us today. As Jesus says in Mark's gospel: 'Wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.'¹ This story is profoundly good news for us.

Jesus has just raised her brother Lazarus from the dead. Before he did so, Mary said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.'² Her faith was absolute; she had complete confidence that Jesus had the ability to save someone from death.

If her faith is remarkable, then so is her honesty. She must have felt devastated and incredulous that Jesus had chosen not to visit Lazarus when he was ill. She manages both to love Jesus completely and say how bewildered and upset she is by what he has done – a balancing act that Christians throughout the ages have found immensely difficult. She expresses her love for him, and also the pain he has caused – not by his actions, but by his absence. Why did he not intervene when he could? How many times have we felt the same?

Mary then witnessed Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, and so she must have been experiencing tumultuous emotions. She had gone from being broken-hearted at the death of her brother, and Jesus' refusal to come earlier and heal him, to indescribable, overwhelming joy at Lazarus being brought back from the dead.

She intuitively realised, more clearly than anyone else, that giving Lazarus his life back would lead to Jesus' own death. The civic and religious rulers would simply not accept such a threat to their authority.³ Lazarus had been taken from her, and Jesus had brought him back.

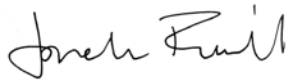
Generous with time

Soon, Jesus himself would be taken from her. It was in the midst of this maelstrom of emotions that she chose to anoint Jesus' feet.

These seven reflections look at the seven different ways in which Mary is generous and how, by following her example, we can grow more in our generosity. But the starting point for understanding her generosity is her relationship with Jesus. It is this relationship that inspires and shapes the generosity, and her generosity is in response to it. 'We love God because he first loved us.'⁴ The more we discover God's love for us, the more we love in return. We can't lead generous lives because we feel we ought to. We live generously because we cannot help it. Our lives have been transformed by the love that first loved us.

These reflections are designed to be used flexibly – they can be used for personal study and reflection, to stimulate discussion within small groups, or to be the basis for preaching and teaching.

My role as Generous Giving Adviser has enabled me to think and reflect on this story and to write these reflections. But, whilst I hope I have gained some insight, I do not see myself as 'sorted' when it comes to living a generous life; far from it. It is a constant struggle, edging forwards hopefully but often tripping up along the way. Living a generous life can sometimes feel like Jacob wrestling with the angel in Genesis 32 – a test of stamina and determination which can leave you exhausted. If your experience is similar, I hope these reflections enable you to be refreshed and inspired by Mary's remarkable act of generosity.



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Memento mori were popular in the sixteenth century. These were various ways to 'remember death', including still life paintings that would have symbols of a successful life artistically laid out, with a human skull as the centrepiece. They were created to remind people that time is fleeting, and that we should not be distracted from the eternal by the transitory.

It's a kind of comfort to know that the difficulty we have in focusing on what matters is hardly a new phenomenon, but it seems to get ever more challenging. There are so many things we could do, so many expectations of what we should do. It is so easy to say that we will stop and focus on God, or others, when we have 'just' done one more thing. But that thing can so easily lead to another and, before we know it, the fleeting time has passed.

Mary's first generosity is with her time. She gives up time that she could have spent on herself to care for Jesus. She puts his needs above hers, not just by providing something, but by giving up her time to anoint his feet. She gives of herself, as well as giving what she has.

Mary instinctively knows what matters more. It's not that she is unaware of other possible demands, but she chooses to give her time to Jesus and to care for him. There is a sense that the anointing of Jesus' feet was not rushed; to wipe his feet with her hair speaks of tenderness and care. She gave her time because she cared for him.

When we are called to live a generous life, we are called to be generous with our time – both to ourselves and to others. Time is a rare and precious commodity, a true gift for someone. By giving other people our time, we are saying to them that they matter and that they have value. In a world where numerous demands compete for our time, it is one of the most generous gifts we can give.

Generous with attention

'Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair.'

I find it remarkably easy to be present, and yet absent, at the same time. I can, undeniably, be physically present, while my mind is very much elsewhere. It's easy to be in the same space as someone, but not really with them. The smartphone has only made this worse. Now it is even easier to be looking in on one world whilst physically inhabiting a different one. I've seen, more than once I'm ashamed to say, that chastening look given when someone sees you on the phone when they thought you were listening to them.

Mary is not only generous with her time, but with her attention. She is clearly focused on the task of anointing Jesus' feet, and then wiping his feet with her hair. That requires real care and attentiveness. She is very much physically and mentally present, and the attention is a generosity all of its own. The gift of the anointing is made meaningful by the attention with which it is given. Yes, the ointment is incredibly expensive, and that could prompt her to be so focused. But the sense of the story is that the generosity of her attention is there because it is another expression of the love she has for Jesus.

When we are looking to develop a generous life, Mary's attentiveness shows us that the attention we give people is an important part of that life. It is not enough to give time; we need to give attention too, and that attention ought to be driven by a deep and profound love. God calls us to love him wholeheartedly, and to love our neighbours as ourselves. As Jesus says, there are no commandments greater than these.

To love others is to give them our attention and focus, and it is in our attentiveness that we really see how we can love and care for others. It allows us to understand their needs, to see where they need encouragement and to celebrate the gifts that God has given them. Being generous simply with our time cannot do this. We need to be generous with our attention too.

Generous with wealth

'Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair.'

Johnny Nash wrote the song 'There Are More Questions Than Answers.'⁵ As a child, I didn't like it much, but it has grown on me over the years. The song, perhaps surprisingly, has remarkable theological depth. In the chorus, Nash asks: 'What is life? How do we live? What should we take and how much should we give?' The move from asking ourselves how much of *our* money should we *give away* to how much of *God's* money should we *keep* is **the** greatest discipleship challenge of generous giving.

Mary saw what she had as God's, so she was just giving back what was already his. Her gift to Jesus cost a year's salary. It was incredibly generous; you might even say reckless. But Jesus' generosity is often reckless, and so she was only following the example of the Jesus she followed. When Jesus turned water into wine at the wedding at Cana, he turned the equivalent of 700 bottles of water into wine. 700 bottles for one small village sounds reckless to me. When Jesus fed the 5,000, there were baskets and baskets of food left over. The ultimate generous act was, of course, God giving his son. God's generosity is extraordinary generosity.

This is immensely difficult for us to live up to. We live in a world which tells us we are what we earn and what we own. There are many, many enticing ways to spend 'our' money. There are huge social pressures and expectations over what we should buy and how we should live. It is really tough to forego things. And we live in a time where many of us struggle with debt, and where tiny houses come with huge mortgages.

So, to emulate Mary's generosity is not easy, and we should be patient and kind to ourselves as we try to live more generously. I recommend trying the 1% challenge. Every year, aim to give 1% more of your net income away. This gives you time to adjust and to plan ahead, to think carefully about how you will live with less. Generosity then becomes purposeful and ingrained, and it becomes ever more who we are, and we become ever more like the generous God who created us.

Generous with talents

'Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair.'

As a child, I had a particular talent for being argumentative, and I was very generous with this talent. I could argue about anything, anywhere, with anyone; in fact, I often didn't need another person to argue with. Years later, I did one of those 'personality profile' tests, and it revealed that my kind of personality 'can find compelling reasons for whatever they want.' I exploded with laughter when I read that. It took years of training as an adolescent to achieve that level of expertise.

We all have talents that reflect 'whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable' ⁶ but we do not always use them for the good. I'd like to think that I have taken the argumentative talent of my childhood and turned it into an ability to encourage people to lead generous lives. I certainly hope so.

Mary's talent in this story is the tender and caring way she anointed Jesus' feet, the feet that would within days be nailed to a cross. Jesus intimates that Mary knows he will soon die – 'She has anointed my body beforehand for its burial' ⁷ – and Mary, faced with that realisation, offers her talents to care for a body that will soon be brutally broken.

Mary felt compelled to use a talent she had and here we are, thousands of years later, being inspired by it. It was, to the disciples at least, a bit 'left field'. Perhaps that's the way God often likes it. God can use the talents he has given us in unexpected ways but, to do so, we need to be open and looking for ways in which we can share those talents with others.

The Quakers have a lovely phrase in their book of 'Faith and Practice' ⁸ – 'Attend to what love requires of you.' ⁹ We need to attend to what our love for God and God's people requires of us, and be generous in the use of our talents to enable us to do that.

Generous with possessions

'Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair.'

'If you own something you cannot give away, then you don't own it, it owns you.' So said Albert Schweitzer. That quote sat on my noticeboard for many years. It's a quote that makes me feel uncomfortable, because I feel I should agree with it, but I fight against it often enough. I like to think there is another option, that we can have things we cannot give away and yet they don't own us. I've been trying to find that other option over several decades, but I'm not sure it exists.

It's an exaggeration to say we live in a society that lives by the mantra 'you are what you own', but it is not that much of an exaggeration. What we possess is often seen as a key indicator of the kind of person we are, what aspirations we have and what we value. If we give away what we have, it is a profoundly counter-cultural act. It is an acknowledgement of faith, a belief that everything comes from God and that we are called to share what we have in the way that God would want.

It can also be a liberation, as Albert Schweitzer suggests. It is easy to fall under the tyranny of things where, without realising it, our lives become dominated by the accumulation of possessions. As painful as it can be to give up some of our possessions, it can also be liberating, as we feel less encumbered, less weighed down, lighter.

Mary had lost, and then found, her beloved brother. Compared to that, material possessions were insignificant to her. She also knew that Jesus would soon die, and she knew that he knew, and so he had a far greater need of the nard than she ever would. Nard sounds uncomfortably close to lard; in reality it is anything but. An incredibly expensive natural oil, it is known for its calming qualities and is used for reducing anxiety. Mary's choice was quite deliberate. She generously gave away a treasured possession and, in doing so, showed her faith and love for Jesus. By giving away some of what we have, we can do the same.

Generous with reputation

'Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair.'

I hate to be embarrassed, or to draw attention to myself by doing something others don't do, so I find this kind of generosity particularly hard. And, perhaps being more honest, I like it when I'm liked and I don't want people's disapproval. But sometimes, like Mary, everyone needs to be generous with their reputation, in order to fulfil Jesus' call to love one another.

Mary anoints Jesus' feet and wipes them with her hair. She may, like us, care what others say about her, but certainly not enough to stop her showing her love and concern for Jesus. For a woman to show her hair was shocking enough; to wipe Jesus' feet with her hair was truly shocking. It was, to say the least, totally inappropriate in the eyes of many. The beautiful picture on the cover of this booklet, painted by Julia Stankova, illustrates this perfectly. Mary is caressing Jesus' feet with her hair, whilst the disciples stare at her, appalled.

Mary, generous in so many ways, is generous with her reputation too. She is prepared to do what is loving, what is caring, and what she believes she should do, even if she receives hostility and criticism for it. Earlier in the story, Mary is sitting at Jesus' feet, which is what the disciples did, but only men could be disciples. It's almost as if Mary was saying, 'If you're appalled by that, you're really going to hate this.' For Mary, love for Christ swamps any concern over reputation. She can be generous with her reputation because it is irrelevant when compared to the opportunity to express her love and care for the one she loves.

In the next chapter of John's gospel, Jesus washes the disciples' feet, and it is hard not to think that the timing is quite deliberate. He has seen the disciples' reaction to Mary anointing his feet, and then he washes theirs. It is a beautiful and powerful endorsement of Mary's actions, and he follows this with the new commandment – 'that you love one another.'¹⁰ Nothing matters more. 'By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples.'¹¹

Generous with comfort

'Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair.'

I once cycled from London to Paris on a sponsored bike ride. On the first training ride with my fellow sufferers, I hit a pothole and fell off my bike. It was bitterly cold and wet and I lay tangled up in the bike on the ice-cold tarmac. I was pretty sure I had broken my leg (I hadn't, as it turned out) so sensibly no-one moved me until the ambulance turned up. To stop the weight of the bike resting on my possibly-but-not-actually broken leg, a team mate sat on the freezing tarmac for twenty minutes, holding the bike up. He must have been frozen, and it must have been deeply uncomfortable, but I will always be grateful for his generosity.

Part of the challenge of leading a generous life is that it takes us out of our comfort zone in so many ways. We have less for ourselves, if we give more to others. We have to forego things we want so others can have things they need. And sometimes living generously has a practical, physical dimension to it.

When Mary anoints Jesus' feet and wipes them with her hair, she must have been down in the dust and the dirt, and it can't have been pleasant. She took on the position of a servant willingly because she could not have shown her love without doing so. She gave up her comfort for a man she knew would soon be giving up his life. We are often called to be generous with our own comfort, to sacrifice it so that others can be loved and cared for. It is relatively easy to do this when asked but much harder to volunteer. Mary sees what she needs to do, puts aside her own comfort and gets on and does it.

The way Mary so generously gave of herself – her time, attention, wealth, talent, possessions, reputation and comfort – are an inspiration for us, and an encouragement to do the same. By living more generously, we follow her example. We also come closer to the generous God who created us, a God who promises to be with us and help us live ever more generous lives.

Acknowledgements

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The painting on the cover is *The Anointing of Christ* by Julia Stankova. (juliastankova.com). Used with permission of the artist.

References

Quotations from the Bible are from the New Revised Standard Version.

¹ Mark 14:9

² John 11:32

³ John 11:53

⁴ 1 John 4:19

⁵ Johnny Nash, from the album *I Can See Clearly Now*, 1972

⁶ Philippians 4:8

⁷ Mark 14:8

⁸ <http://qfp.quaker.org.uk/introduction/>

⁹ Advices & Queries, no.28

¹⁰ John 13:34

¹¹ John 13:35

About the author

Jonathan Farnhill is the Generous Giving Adviser for the Diocese of Oxford, and has an MA in Applied Theology from the University of Exeter. His book *The Porcupine Principle (and other fundraising secrets)* is published by the Directory of Social Change. This has led to speaking engagements in the UK and abroad, and many of his presentations are available on www.farnhill.org.uk. He has worked in leadership and fundraising roles for charitable organisations for 30 years. He has also held various voluntary leadership roles within the charitable, social enterprise and education sectors.



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