

## Sermon: Costly Perfume, Priceless Love

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles PC, April 3, 2022)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts  
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

What is the most beautiful, the most extravagant, and perhaps the most expensive thing that you have ever done for Jesus?

[slide 1] I put this question to you, as I reflect on the dream of Donald Jackson, the British calligrapher and the official scribe to the Crown Office of the United Kingdom. Beginning in 1970, Jackson started to express in media his lifelong desire to create a completely handwritten and illuminated Bible. So in 1998, commissioned by the Benedictine Monks at Saint John's University, Jackson began his work on what would turned out to be a true masterpiece, titled 'The Saint John's Bible'. The final product is divided over seven volumes, each two feet tall by three feet wide when open. The book is written entirely on vellum by quill, containing 160 illuminations, taking 23 artists and calligraphers over 11 years to complete. Some of the illuminations are simply breathtaking, making the words of God come alive for the 21st century. Let me show you what I mean.

[slide 2] Here is the opening page of the Bible, of Genesis chapter 1, *'In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep...'*. Note the illumination on the left, where that chaotic and formless void is illustrated, from the left, and progressing each strip depicting each day of creation, and finally ending with that last strip—the day when God rested.

[slide 3] Here is the opening page of the book of Ecclesiastes, *'Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?'* One should ponder or even be disturbed by this vision of vanity and toil, but one cannot deny the allure of this captivating page.

[slide 4] Behold this illumination of the Gospel of John where, *'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.'* Then jumping to verse 14, *'And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth'*

[slide 5] How about this vision of the four housemen of the Apochaplyps, as revealed in the Book of Revelation. Notice this scene is set in the background of the industrial age, with tanks and oil rigs dominating this illumination. What a chilling thought to think that we may be, in fact, living in the end-time. If that indeed is the case, would our faith be strong enough to stand, and to stand firm?

[slide 6] Here is the last slide that I am sharing with you today, chapter 24 of the Gospel of Luke, the story of the resurrection of Jesus, and accompanying the two disciples on their walk to Emmaus. Note the use of a bright and glorious golden colour to illuminate the cross—a bold theological statement that the glory of God is seen most brightly through the event of the cross.

The Saint John's Bible by Donald Jackson is indeed a master piece of human collaboration, ingenuity and creativity, a work that would still endure after 500 years. And this work did not come cheap; it came with an extravagant price tag of \$8 million dollars. As expected, it raised a number of questions among critics: Why was the money wasted in this way? This money could have been given to the poor.

You will note that these are the same questions asked when Jesus was anointed by Mary of Bethany, in our Scriptural reading today, in John 12:1-8. It was six days before the Passover when Jesus arrived at the town of Bethany, to the home of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. Jesus was on his journey to the cross, he would soon face that fickle crowd in Jerusalem where an outpouring of hospitality would quickly turn into an unimaginable hostility.

But before all that, Jesus was amongst friends. They gave a dinner for him. Martha served, as Martha is known to be quite a good host. Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead, was at the table with him, enjoying good food, good wine, and good to be alive.

Out of the blue, Mary came into the dining room. With some hesitation as she was not sure how her action would be perceived by others, would be received by Jesus. Nevertheless, she sensed an unmistakable sadness in her Lord. A sadness that was completely missed by others, a sadness caused by the weight of his task ahead, a sadness that Mary had hoped could be taken away, in some way.

So Mary gathered enough courage as she knelt down before Jesus. She then took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, with trembling hand and trembling heart, she anointed the feet of Jesus, wiping them with her hair. It was an unplanned and perhaps foolish act; it was certainly an

extravagant gesture as the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

The room stood still as the eyes of all were focused on Mary and Jesus. As everyone were trying to comprehend what was happening before them, trying to make sense of what had taken place, trying to figure out how to respond, Judas Iscariot spoke. He was a disciple of Jesus, and in case the reader might be uncertain of his upcoming role, the author of John's Gospel added that Judas was the one who was about to betray Jesus.

Judas was the first one to speak, first to comment on the action of Mary, first to cast a stone, "*Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?*" A good question, as in the time of Jesus, nard is not supposed to be used in that way, to wash feet. A pure nard is normally used as an incense offering in the Temple. It could also be used to prepare a body for burial. Water is used to wash feet of guests, usually not by the host but by servants. So this unexpected act of Mary, in the culture of that time, was highly inappropriate and totally wasteful, as a pound of pure nard was worth three hundred denarii—nearly a year worth of wages for a commoner. Indeed it could be used more appropriately, like selling it and giving alms to the poor.

Here the author of the Gospel interjects again, informing us that Judas said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it—indicating to us the true intension of Judas, was in fact anything but pure.

We are not sure, at this point, how the others felt. But before Judas could rally more support to his cause, Jesus stopped him quickly, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Thus we have come to a fuller understanding of this extravagant gesture of Mary. She did not want to wait until after his death to show her care for the Lord. She wanted to show care for Jesus, while she still has him, while he is still alive, to appreciate and perhaps reciprocate. It is a gesture of more than care; it is a gesture of love. And Jesus did reciprocate. He did so on the cross, in that act of pure sacrificial love, not just for Mary, but for the whole of humanity.

I should add that the action of Mary really should be compared to that of Nicodemus, the Pharisee who had at first came to Jesus by night. After the death of Jesus, Nicodemus had assisted Joseph of Arimathea in preparing the body of Jesus for burial. According to the Gospel of John,

chapter 19, they brought with them for that burial, a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. Another extravagant gesture.

This brings us back to the opening question that I posed earlier: What is the most beautiful, the most extravagant, and perhaps the most expensive thing that you have ever done for Jesus?

I know it is a tricky question to answer, because in light of what Jesus had done for us on the cross, everything else pales in comparison. To be frank, Jesus, being the Son of God, and part of the Triune God, probably doesn't need us to do expensive things for him.

Nevertheless, I get the feeling that he would appreciate our gestures. He would appreciate our efforts to reciprocate his love, in whatever way, shape, or form. To reciprocate the love of Christ by sharing that love with others. So that when he comes, finally, in glory, all knees shall bend, all tongues shall confess that Jesus is Lord.

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