

THE STORY, OUR STORY, MY STORY

Lent 5 All Souls' 2025 THE FRAGRANCE OF LOVE

John 12.3 Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet and wipe them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

I listen to people who get a bit downhearted about the small numbers in many churches around our diocese, most of which still enjoy rich, colourful, sacramental, incarnational worship and tradition, while others pull in the numbers with their hardline, black and white teaching. We should however rejoice and trust in these wonderful outposts of solid Anglican-Catholic tradition, which are inclusive, generous of heart, welcoming broken, wounded, alienated and marginalised people – all looking for love, for the blissful certainty of being wanted, recognised and cherished. (Last night, the Order of St Lazarus fed nearly a 100 down-and-out people at St Mary Mag's) All Souls' and our partner church, St Theodore's, have such a rich, sacramental and hallowed past. We are also progressive. May we be proud to be inclusive and enfold all who seek God's love, mercy and justice, regardless of their social or sexual status in life. Today's Gospel is all about this and more.

There are a number of 'Marys' in the NT. Mary Magdalene was not the same woman as the Mary with the alabaster jar of precious ointment but I am certain that she, who met the 'stranger' in the Easter garden- now just 2 weeks away, also had such an experience of love in her encounter with Jesus that her life was totally transformed. She wanted to cling to him forever – the one whom her soul loved, who sought him and found him. And will we not be overcome with her joy once more at the end of this sacred season? I am, as I try to capture that moment of her wondrous recognition in my heart. Mary, in her Christ encounter, became a new creation, the old had passed away (the old included 7 demons we are informed by Luke 8.2...whatever they were); behold the new had come. And we, with our demons, are equally loved with all the Marys, and equally gifted with this transforming love if we would receive it.

This awakening to divine love has done amazing things to people over the Christian centuries. Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk who died in 1968, lived in the strictest of monastic conditions in his Kentucky hermitage. Yet he would speak of such inner growth and a festive sense of God's presence in words that remind me of the way I felt after my first date with my wife. "Love sails me around the house... I walk two steps on the ground and four steps in the air. It is love. It is consolation...to say that I am made in the image of God is to say that love is the reason for my existence, for God is love." Elsewhere, Merton says, "Love is the key to the meaning of life. It is at the same time transformation in Christ and the discovery of Christ. As we grow in love and unity with those who are loved by Christ...we become more and more capable of apprehending and obscurely grasping something of the tremendous reality of Christ in the world, Christ in ourselves and Christ in others..."

Our greatest dignity, the essence and most intimate secret of our humanity, is our capacity to love. Gabrielle Bossis in her dialogue with God as recorded in her book, *He and I*, reveals a most innocent and profound communion with divine love:

The Father says: 'You are astonished by my love. There is only one explanation: God's extravagance. So just believe in all simplicity in this love...And give yourself up to his infinitely delicate and tender power. Be taken captive by love and ask for grace. Love me with my love and be full of trust...Practice the presence of my love. I am everywhere. Put

your head on my heart. Of course, since this pleases me. If only you understood the gift of God and who it is speaking to you...Come to me, then, and bring others in your heart...fan flames of your love...don't stand still. Never cease to go forward. Enter even deeper and deeper into my heart. Reading about my passion is not enough. Make it a part of your very self. Wherever you are, take my sufferings. Sufferings desired, willed, expected...they are my love for my children - for you'.

We do need to remember that in real life *true* love is often born of pain, suffering or misunderstanding. In any worthwhile relationship, this will be discovered as we are refined in love. I am sure that this is what happened with Mary Magdalene and Jesus, and neither of them married. Hopefully, it happens to us too. In the game of marriage itself, I am saddened when I meet women and men who say that they are “no longer in love” with their partner. Often this might simply mean that they have been hurt or misunderstood or no longer feel the physical buzz they once felt. Too many people who think they've fallen out of love have never learned deeply *to love*. Our early ‘in-love’ feelings are just the icing; what sustains us for the long haul is the cake: the solid, deep, fruitful ingredients of abiding love, one for the other. I also believe that most of the same-sex marriage debate in the Church misses this crucial issue, despite such marriage now being civil law in this country. These people are also knocking on *our* doors. Ironically, when we talk about union or marriage, we are talking much more about abiding companionship, fulfilling relationship, the blissful certainty of being wanted and loved in faithfulness by another human being, rather than simply sex. What really matters to most people in the relationship of marriage, what brings many to overwhelming tears of joy, is the deep and abiding love, strength and companionship they have in each other's gifted presence and security. And *this* is what we need to bless and celebrate as a church! Instead of being so hung-up just about sex. Meanwhile, celibacy should be strictly a matter of choice; enforced celibacy: enforced loneliness on the other hand, is simply immoral.

Now, in celebration of the Marys, Martha, Lazarus and of single, celibate, partnered and married love, I offer a reflection by an unknown author entitled *I LOVE YOU*:

*I love you,
not only for what you are,
but for what I am when I am with you.*

*I love you,
for passing over all my foolish and
weak traits that you can't help but
see.*

*I love you
not only for what you have made of yourself,
but what you are making of me.*

*I love you,
for drawing out into the light my
beauty that no-one else had looked
quite far enough to find.*

I love you

For personal or group reflection:

- Have you ever received an act of extravagant love displayed to you?
- Ponder the different celebrations of love you have experienced in your life e.g. in marriage, family, community, friends...
- What ‘demons’ would you like to say goodbye to this Lent?
- How could our church be more extravagant, ‘fragrant’ and inclusive in love?
- Pray for people whom you find it hard to like or love.