

# Breaking Open the Word

Lent 4C

6<sup>th</sup> April, 2025



## **Total Devotion or the Stench of Self-Righteousness?**

A weekly reflection and  
sermon, with study and  
prayer guides following the  
RCL Lectionary

Dennis Webster



## Revised Common Lectionary

### Lent 4C

Isaiah 43.16-21

Psalms 126

Philippians 3.4b-14

John 12.1-8

Book of Common Prayer (1662) Collect

---

Introduction

---

Reflection

---

Discussion Questions

---

Five Days of Meditation and Prayer

---

We beseech thee, Almighty God,  
mercifully to look upon thy people:  
that by thy great goodness  
they may be governed  
and preserved evermore,  
both in body and soul:  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

## INTRODUCTION

This sermon's central theme revolves around the contrast between true devotion and self-righteousness, illustrated through the story of Mary and Judas during a meal with Jesus in Bethany. Mary's act of pouring expensive perfume on Jesus' feet is a profound expression of love and sacrifice, while Judas's hypocrisy, disguised as a concern for the poor, is highlighted.

This calls for self-reflection, urging the congregation to evaluate whether their lives emit the fragrance of total devotion or the stench of self-interest and spiritual decay. Furthermore, it explores the implications of devotion in the context of Christian leadership, emphasising the responsibility to protect those who passionately follow Christ from unjust criticism.

Neglecting true devotion under the guise of practicality reinforces that genuine love for God must be accompanied by selfless love for others.

Ultimately, listeners should consider their spiritual aroma—are they living lives entirely devoted to Christ, like Mary, or are they holding back due to fears of reputation and self-preservation?

The sermon concludes with an encouragement to embody the delightful fragrance of love, reminding the congregation of the importance of giving their all to Jesus.

### Prayer Prompts

- Thank God for examples of total devotion like Mary's and how we can emulate that in our lives.
- Ask for strength to let go of self-righteousness and embrace true sacrifice in our relationship with Christ.
- Pray for guidance in identifying areas where we can offer more of ourselves to God this week.
- Invite the sharing of personal prayer requests among your faith circle.

God of Creation, breathe into us, made of clay,  
your gift of life so that we, made in your image  
may become your eyes, ears, hands and voice.

Introduction:

### A Meal with Jesus

Imagine the scene: a meal among close friends. The house in Bethany is filled with warmth, laughter, and the aroma of freshly prepared food. Lazarus, once wrapped in grave clothes, now sits alive at the table. His sisters, Martha and Mary, serve in their own ways—Martha, the ever-dedicated hostess, and Mary, who chooses to pour out all she has at the feet of Jesus.

It is not only the devotion that Mary expresses. Elsewhere in the Gospel of John, we encounter Martha and Mary. Martha is concerned that she has been left to provide hospitality while Mary chose to sit in the position of a disciple, capturing every word that Jesus spoke. It is Martha who objects to this situation. “Do you not care that the burden of work has been left to me?” she asked. The rebuke was gentle but fitting. “Leave her alone. Mary has chosen the better way.”

Once again, in Bethany, we encounter the same house and a situation similar to the previous one. Mary is again at the feet of

Jesus. This time, while Martha is providing hospitality, Mary has taken a jar of costly ointment, valued at around three years' wages. She begins to anoint Jesus' feet. Using her tears, she washes them and then wipes them with her hair. The washing of feet is a fundamental ritual of welcome, while the anointing represents something different.

The fragrance of costly perfume fills the house. It is an act so extravagant, so deeply personal, that it draws both admiration and scorn. Judas Iscariot's reaction—his protest that the perfume could have been sold for the poor—fails the ‘pub test.’ It doesn't sit right. It doesn't smell right. And we must ask ourselves today: What do we smell like? Do our lives exude the fragrance of total devotion, or do we reek of self-righteousness and spiritual decay?

### **\*\*The Fragrance of Devotion\*\***

Mary's act of devotion embodied reckless, unreserved love. The perfume she used, pure nard, was costly—worth a year's wages. However, her actions were not evaluated by monetary value; they were assessed by

the worth of the One she anointed. Her offering represented profound, personal sacrifice, an expression of her love for Jesus, the one who had brought her brother back from the dead. In contrast, Judas' words appear pious, even noble. On the surface, his concern for the poor seems righteous, but John reveals his true motive—greed and self-interest.

How often do we fall into the same trap? How often do we disguise self-interest as concern for others? Do we hold back from giving our all to Christ under the guise of prudence? The ‘pub test’ applies here—Judas' words do not pass. They reek of hypocrisy.

### **The danger of losing sight of our mission**

And see what Jesus does next: He defends Mary. Once again, the words used echo a previous day. “Leave her alone,” He says. Jesus protects her from Judas' hypocritical criticism. Part of Christian leadership is this very work—guarding those who follow Christ with abandon, shielding them from unjust attacks, and standing up against false religious hypocrisy. If someone is following Christ exuberantly, they will be criticised. As a church, we must care for one another, and leaders especially are called to protect the sheep.

### **The Danger of Poverty of the Soul**

Dr. Jason Koker, Head of the Baptist Church USA's Together in Hope programme, puts it plainly: using “the poor you will always have with you” as an excuse for inaction is the worst kind of poverty—it is the poverty of the soul. Jesus' words do not endorse neglect but rather recognise that true devotion to God and love for our neighbour are inseparable. The law of love—loving God with all we have and loving our neighbour as ourselves—serves as the lens through which all else is filtered.

In Philippians 3, Paul speaks of considering all things ‘rubbish’—the Greek word here is more blunt, meaning refuse or even what belongs in the sewer—when compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ. The stench of self-righteousness, self-justification, and half-hearted faith is contrasted with the fragrance of total devotion. When we cling to our own status, wealth, or even our reputations more than to Christ, we are left with spiritual decay.

Psalms 126 reminds us that those who sow in tears will reap shouts of joy. The true fruit of faith is found not in a measured and calculated religion, but in a life poured out—sometimes with

tears, occasionally with sacrifice, but always in love.

### What Do We Smell Like?

I reflect on the dedication of the Narthex and the smoking ceremony before entering the building. We were reminded that once we passed through the sacred aromas of our natural world, we should stop focusing on our distinctions and realise that, censed by the commonality of community, we all smell the same.

When Mary poured out her perfume, she offered Jesus her all. When Judas protested, he revealed his own heart. We are left with a question: what do our lives smell like? Are we the aroma of Christ, as Paul mentions in 2 Corinthians 2:15, or do we cling to what should be discarded?

The challenge is clear: will we offer Christ everything or hold back? Do we accept love wholeheartedly, or do we limit our devotion?

Let us follow Mary's example by choosing the delightful fragrance of love over the unpleasantness of self-righteousness. Amen.



### What is nard?

Nard, also known as **spikenard**, is a highly aromatic, amber-coloured ointment derived from the **Nardostachys jatamansi** plant, which grows in the Himalayan regions of Nepal, India, and China. It was an extremely valuable perfume and anointing oil in ancient times, often associated with kings, priests, and acts of deep devotion.

In the Bible, nard is mentioned in **John 12:3**, where Mary anoints Jesus' feet with *pure nard*, an act of extravagant love and worship. Its high cost (about a year's wages) made it a symbol of total devotion and sacrifice.

Nard was also used for **burial preparations**, which is significant because Mary's act prefigured Jesus' upcoming death. The fragrance of nard was so potent that it would linger, much like the lasting impact of true worship and sacrifice.

### Discussion Questions

1. What motivated Mary to pour out the expensive perfume on Jesus' feet, and how does this compare to Judas' objection about the waste of money?

Mary's act was described as reckless love, while Judas's reaction was fuelled by self-interest and greed.

Can you think of a time when you had to choose between being generous and practical? What did you decide?

2. In what ways do you think self-righteousness can disguise itself as concern for others, as seen in Judas' comments?

Judas pretended to care for the poor while being motivated by his desires.

Have you ever found yourself justifying your actions or choices under the guise of helping others? What did you learn from that experience?

3. Why do you think Jesus defended Mary when she anointed His feet, and what does this teach us about supporting others in their devotion to God?

Jesus' defence of Mary teaches us the importance of protecting those genuinely following him from criticism.

How can you support your friends or family members in their spiritual journeys, especially when they face criticism from others?

What does it mean to have a 'poverty of the soul' as mentioned in the sermon, and how does this relate to our relationship with God?

The sermon highlighted that neglecting true devotion in favour of excuses reflects a more profound spiritual poverty.

How can you nurture your relationship with God so you don't fall into this poverty?



Reflecting on Philippians 3, what does it mean to consider everything as 'rubbish' compared to knowing Christ?

The concept emphasises the value of knowing Christ over worldly possessions or statuses.

What are some 'things' in your life that you might need to reassess to prioritise your relationship with Christ?

### Conversation Starters

What do you think made Mary's act of devotion so special?

This relates to the part where Mary anoints Jesus' feet and uses her tears, showing her deep love and sacrifice.

Why do you think Judas reacted when he saw Mary's actions?

This comes from the discussion about Judas criticising Mary for using the expensive perfume instead of selling it for the poor.

How can we show our devotion to Jesus in our daily lives?

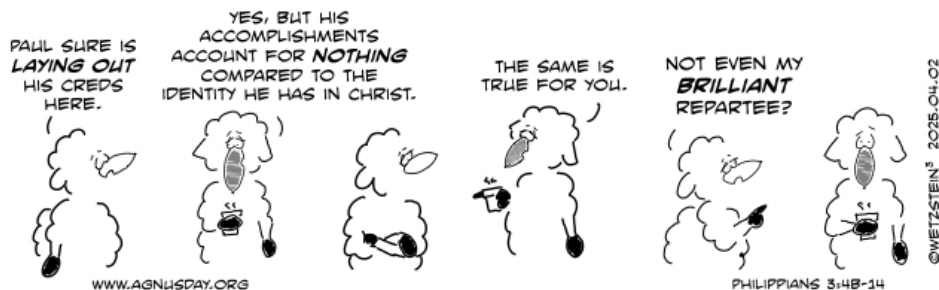
This connects to demonstrating our love for Jesus through our actions.

What is meant by "the fragrance of devotion"?

This question refers to the metaphor used to describe how our actions reflect devotion or self-righteousness.

Can you think of a time when you chose to do something special for someone you love, like Mary did for Jesus?

This is inspired by Mary's extravagant gesture of love and sacrifice.



### Five Day Devotional

This five-day devotional will be taking a deeper dive into the sermon from this weekend. We will explore the theme of total devotion versus self-righteousness through the lens of biblical stories, encouraging reflection and personal growth as we aim to embody the fragrance of love in our daily lives.



### Day 1 John 12:1-8

The story of Mary anointing Jesus with costly perfume is a powerful reminder of total devotion. In a world that often prioritises practicality and monetary values, Mary's act stands out as an example of unreserved love for Christ. Her willingness to offer everything she has—wealth and emotion—teaches us that true devotion is not measured by our gifts but by our intentions and love for Jesus. As we reflect on her actions, we are invited to consider what we are willing to sacrifice in our own lives for the sake of our faith. In contrast, Judas's voice raises questions regarding our motivations when we express concern for others. Are we, like Judas, cloaking our self-interest as righteous concern? The challenge is to evaluate our own hearts: Do we seek to glorify God through our actions, or do we reserve parts of ourselves out of fear of vulnerability? It is this radical abandon in devotion that we are called to embody.

\*What does total devotion look like in my daily life?

\*In what areas do I hold back my love or service to God?

\*How can I respond to the needs of others without allowing self-interest to creep in?

\*Pray for a heart that is willing to give freely to God.

\*Ask God to reveal areas of your life where self-interest may be hiding.

### Day 2 Philippians 3:7-8

In this passage, Paul emphasises the worthlessness of everything compared to knowing Christ. Mary's discipleship showcases a selfless love that prioritises relationships over material possessions. As we navigate life's distractions and demands, we must ask ourselves if we genuinely view our relationship with Christ as the most precious element in our lives. When we recognise who Christ is and what He has done for us, our devotion should overflow in a way that is fragrant and irresistible to others.

If we cling to our social status, wealth, or pride, we risk the stench of spiritual decay that repels those around us. Just as Paul considered all worldly things rubbish, we must evaluate what holds us back from a

more profound, sacrificial commitment to Christ. This reflection prompts us to let go of the things that no longer serve our mission of love and devotion.

- \*In what ways do I prioritise my relationship with Christ above all else?
- \*What are the "things" in my life that I need to consider as rubbish?
- \*How can I remind myself daily of Christ's surpassing worth?
  
- \*Seek clarity in prayer about your commitments.
- \*Invite the Holy Spirit to transform your perspective on worldly attachments.

### Day 3          2 Corinthians 2:15

Paul refers to believers as the aroma of Christ to those who are being saved and those who are perishing. This image invites us to reflect on the atmosphere we create in our interactions with the world. When we embody the love of Christ, our lives should attract others, much like a sweet fragrance. However, when we allow self-righteousness or hypocrisy to creep in, we can repel those searching for hope and truth. Mary's devotion illustrates how our genuine love for Jesus can produce a sweetness that draws others closer to Him. As we strive to become the aroma of Christ, we must also be aware of the spiritual influences surrounding us. Are we allowing external pressures or judgments to dictate how we express our faith? By focusing on the unconditional love Christ has for us, we can successfully extend that love to others and become tangible symbols of His grace in a world searching for authenticity.

- \*How does my behaviour reflect the love of Christ to those around me?
- \*What steps can I take to create an inviting atmosphere in my community?
- \*In what ways do I need to let go of negative influences that hinder my witness?
  
- \*Pray for opportunities to be a blessing to others in your community.
- \*Ask God to help you embody His love and grace in every interaction.

### Day 4          Luke 10:27

In this passage, Jesus sums up the law of love by instructing us to love God fully and our neighbours as ourselves. This dual command emphasises that our love for God is inherently linked to how we treat others. The question arises: Can we genuinely love others without first

recognising the love that God has for us? Our devotion to God should compel us to serve others, pouring our energies into acts of kindness and compassion. Mary's act exemplified this; her worship of Jesus was not separate from her love for her community. When we recognise the fruit of devotion in our lives, we are more willing to engage in acts that reflect Christ's love. Conversely, if we become complacent and self-focused, we will miss those opportunities to show love. The challenge is to make love our priority, unleashing the power of His devotion through our lives in ways that enhance our communities.

- \*How can I deepen my love for God in practical ways?
- \*In what ways can I demonstrate love to my neighbours this week?
- \*What barriers exist that prevent me from loving others as myself?
  
- \*Pray for a heart open to serving others.
- \*Ask God to guide your understanding of love in action.

### Day 5          Psalm 126:5

This psalm reminds us that those who sow in tears will reap with joy—a beautiful truth that encourages perseverance in our devotion. The imagery of sowing represents the practice of investing ourselves wholly in God. Just as Mary poured out her expensive perfume, we are called to release our burdens and sorrows into the hands of our Saviour, trusting that He will transform our sacrifices into something joyful. This day of devotion serves as a reminder that our journeys may involve pain, yet they are also opportunities for God to produce joy amidst our struggles.

Embracing vulnerability as part of our worship allows us to reflect on the depths of love—Christ's love for us and the love we should embody towards others.

As we conclude this devotional series, let us hold fast to these lessons and allow the fragrance of devotion to guide us in our daily lives, turning the unpleasantness of self-righteousness into the sweetness of unwavering love.

- \*What tears do I need to release to God today?
- \*How can I cultivate joy amid difficult circumstances?
- \*How can I continue to sow seeds of faith beyond this devotional?
  
- \*Thank God for the joy that He promises amidst our tears.
- \*Seek opportunities to express gratitude for the journey he has brought you through.

# End notes and further reading

Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of Luke (St Paul's Press)

The Gospel of Matthew

The Gospel of John

Tannehill, Robert C, **Narrative Unity Luke Acts Vol: A Literary Interpretation: Volume One: The Gospel According to Luke**., Augsburg Fortress Publishers 199

The Rev Dr K. Jason Coker. <https://reflections.yale.edu/article/faith-not-fear-varieties-christian-practice/poor-you-ll-always-have-you>

Dr Josh Moody, God Centred Life: <https://godcenteredlife.org/devotional/john-121-11-the-poor-you-will-always-have-with-you/>

Rev Dr Andrew McGowan: Andrew's Version: <https://substack.com/@abmcg>

The following authors as featured at *The Woship Cloud*

[www.theworshipcloud.com](http://www.theworshipcloud.com)

N. T. Wright, Jane Williams, PJames Woodward, Paula Gooder and Mark Pryce, David Perry



Brabarlung Totem

This is produced on

Gunaikurnai Country and  
our respects are paid to the  
First Nations people  
everywhere.

Prepared by Rev'd Dennis Webster, Rector of the Anglican Parish of Paynesville,  
Diocese of Gippsland for personal or small group use.

Acknowledgement of use appreciated

Subscription to "www.breaking-open-the-word.org" is available.

Published every weekend, usually on Saturday evening, AEST.

Biblical Quotes are from The New Revised Standard Version - Anglicised,  
which is © 1990 the National Churches of Christ, USA.

Study notes are prepared in conjunction and by subscription of [www.church.tech](http://www.church.tech), an AI open source for pastors. Content is modified for local use.

Images are either from public domain, [theworshipcloud.org](http://theworshipcloud.org), original work or generated.

[tastigr.info](http://tastigr.info)

is registered to D. M Webster

and all rights are reserved. © 2025

[www.breaking-open-the-word.org](http://www.breaking-open-the-word.org)

Email: [dennis-at-stpetersbythelakeanglicanchurch.org](mailto:dennis-at-stpetersbythelakeanglicanchurch.org)

