

Lent is all about discipline, restraint, self denial. Yet here we are, on the fifth Sunday of Lent and the gospel reading is about a rash display of love with absolutely no sense of restraint at all.

We don't hear a great deal about Mary and Martha, but Mary comes across as a virtuous, rather serious, young woman. But she is clearly a more complex person than that would imply. What do we know? She is not badly off. She can't be - she has jar of pure nard. This is a perfume made from the root of the Spikenard plant, *Nardostachys jatamansi* for the horticulturalists among you, a member of the valerian family, which only grows on open mountainside at an altitude of 13,000 feet in the Himalayas. We are talking about something more costly than gold. It was used for making perfume and also for offering at the Temple altar. The perfume had many uses, including use in burial of important people. But would Mary have bought this for a burial (not the kind of thing a young girl thinks about even when her brother has died and been returned to life) or as part of her preparation for marriage? Whatever the reason, and however wealthy she was, this was not something to be treated lightly.

Yet here, in this story, we have her pouring the whole lot over Jesus's feet. No wonder some people thought 'what a waste'. And over his feet! Anointing with oil was associated with pouring the oil on the head, not the feet. Feet are dirty. The only time you might put oil on feet was after death, when the whole body might be anointed. So this is a strange as well as an exaggerated gesture.

But it gets stranger!

Mary is a person of prayer, devout. She listens at Jesus feet. As an unmarried young woman, there would be certain proprieties. Mary sounds like the sort of girl to respect those, she would have decorum, and so unless she was very young indeed, her hair, her crowning glory, would be braided, not hanging loose, and yet she unbraids her hair and wipes Jesus' feet with it. Now in Luke's gospel we have a similar story but there the woman weeps and wipes her tears off Jesus' feet with her hair. That woman traditionally is thought of as a woman of the streets, and so such a wanton act might be seen as being in keeping, but for Mary it is quite scandalous.

The traditional symbolism of this story in St John's gospel and indeed in Mark's gospel where it is similar but not identical (happening there at the house of Simon the leper, who some believe to be the father of Lazarus, Martha and Mary), is that this is a prophetic anointing of Jesus prior to his death. That does explain why the feet are anointed, but it doesn't seem to explain everything and of course we can never know the full details of what actually happened or why St John included this story in his gospel.

What I find most interesting about this story is the sense of excess. There is a reckless extravagance about Mary's actions, a lack of worry about the future, a total entering into the intensity of the moment.

And as I thought about Mary, a lady called Miss Bentley came to mind.

When I moved to Frimley Green, my first contact with a parishioner other than the wardens came in the form of a letter, which arrived a week before my licensing, before I had taken any services. It was a letter of complaint.

I had rashly written an article for the Parish Newsletter in which I stated how I wanted to welcome everyone to the church. Not very controversial! I read it through again. What had so incensed her? Well, several things. First I was a woman. There wasn't a lot I could do about that. Secondly, she was worried that I might change things – as she put it, she was 'prayer book'. Thirdly, she didn't want riff raff coming in and spoiling her church because nothing had been the same since they build the M3.

Where church was concerned, Miss Bentley was very proper. She still came to church, always wearing a hat, she would kneel, even though it was obviously painful for her to do so, she didn't like sharing the peace, but she would not come up for communion – at least, not at the start. Then, as we got to know each other better, one day, without any comment or fuss, she came up and received communion. I knew that this was a big decision for her.

So life went on. She continued to complain if she felt that church was straying from its proper path – her particular concern was that it lacked discipline, like all people nowadays. But she too was changing. She was finding it more difficult to get to church and sometimes needed communion at her home. Once when visiting I noticed on her bookcase a picture of a very beautiful young woman. I asked about it – it was her. She talked animatedly about her youth. She had been very good at dancing. There was an exuberance about the woman in the picture that didn't really match the Miss Bentley I thought I knew.

As the weeks went on, I got to know her better. She never changed her firm views on church and society. As she approached her final days, she talked more about her faith. And then something amazing happened. In the way she looked, by the light in her eyes, I could see that beautiful young woman who danced. There was the same exuberance, the same freedom, a lightness, completely at odd with the prim Miss Bentley. It was only at this time that I discovered her Christian name – Gwendoline, a name I'm afraid I have always associated with 'The Importance of Being Ernest'. Miss Bentley had firm and very proper views on the church, but Gwendoline knew Christ and Christ knew Gwendoline.

Mary and Gwendoline both had this joyous, intense, relationship with Christ. They were both respectable, reasonably well off ladies, but with a reckless generosity when it came to Christ – a generosity that echoes Christ’s own generosity, his own limitless outpouring of love.

And this is the other side of the Lenten coin, the flip side to the discipline and restraint. We need both. We cannot live fully without giving and receiving the love of Christ, but we need the discipline and restraint in our own relationships - with food, with possessions, and indeed with people. We cannot let our actions always be ruled by our feelings – we would be all over the place – except in this one relationship, our relationship with Christ. We don’t have to be perhaps quite as prim as Miss Bentley, but we do need a restraint, a sense of discipline, in order to know fully the freedom and joy that can come from trust in Christ. There we can let go, because we can trust completely, because we know that he will never betray us, he will never give us anything other than the purest love, he will never misinterpret our actions, because he knows us better than we know ourselves. So we can respond to his passion with passion too.

Amen.