



## Opening Prayer for Lent

Almighty God,  
to whom all hearts are open, all desires known,  
and from whom no secrets are hidden;  
cleanse the thoughts of our hearts,  
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,  
that we may perfectly love you,  
and worthily magnify your holy name;  
through Christ our Lord. **Amen**

## 'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

What's the most generous thing that anyone has ever done for you?  
What happened, and how did this impact you?

## Psalm of the Week – Psalm 126

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,  
we were like those who dream.  
**Then our mouth was filled with laughter,  
and our tongue with shouts of joy;**  
then it was said among the nations,  
**'The Lord has done great things for them.'**  
**The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.**  
Restore our fortunes, O Lord,  
like the watercourses in the Negeb.

**May those who sow in tears  
reap with shouts of joy.**

Those who go out weeping,  
bearing the seed for sowing,  
**shall come home with shouts of joy,  
carrying their sheaves.**

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;  
**as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever.**  
**Amen**

## Prayers of Renewal

Jesus told his disciples that if they wanted to follow him,  
they needed to deny themselves,  
and take up their crosses.  
God calls us into that same movement  
of dying to sin and rising again with Christ.  
In this quiet space for reflection,  
let us bring to God those things in need of renewal:

*Silence is kept for a few moments...*

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;  
**have mercy upon us.**

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;  
**have mercy upon us.**

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;  
**grant us peace.**

God of our journeys and false starts and new beginnings,  
you walk with us all of our days,  
and nothing in life or death or all creation

can separate us from your love in Jesus Christ.  
Thank you that you forgive us our faults and mistakes,  
share with us in our worries and struggles,  
and lead us onwards into fullness of life.  
We offer these prayers in the name of Jesus. **Amen**

**Reading** John 12:1 – 8

### **Sermon**

I've heard it said that we know more about the dark side of the moon than we do about the human brain. This might well be something of an exaggeration, but it is certainly true that we still have a lot to learn about how our memories work. All our senses can trigger memories, some of which we may not have consciously thought about for many years. However, according to the ever-reliable source of information that is BBC Breakfast News, smells are understood by scientists to be particularly potent in terms of bringing very vivid memories to the front of our minds. This is something that makes sense to me, if only because of the laughing clown at Blackpool Pleasure Beach. When I was a young child, this stood on the site where their Funhouse had previously been, before the fire, although I gather it's now gone. I've never liked real-life clowns, but this one was worse because it never stopped its seriously creepy laugh, and the mechanism which made it work stank of burning rubber. Whenever I smell this odour – which is thankfully not often – it always reminds me of that clown. For good or ill, smells are powerful things...

Today's reading clearly stems from a very powerful memory etched into the minds of Jesus' disciples. Yet, although it's one of those few episodes to make it into all four Gospels, they disagree on important storytelling details. In John, for example, the anointing of Jesus with costly perfume is performed by Mary, who was the sister of Lazarus and Martha, and the action takes place within their home. However,

in both of the two earliest accounts, in Matthew (26:6 – 13) and Mark (14:3 – 9), the setting was the house of Simon the Leper, the woman remained anonymous, and Jesus' head was anointed as well as his feet, making this incident feel more like the coronation of a monarch. The account in Luke differs again, not least as it's now located much earlier on in the Gospel narrative (Luke 7:36 – 49), and this time the woman is identified, in not so many words, as a sex worker.

Now, this could all mean that Jesus was anointed on more than one occasion, though these differing accounts could also be the product of theological reflection on a single incident, by different authors and for different purposes. We need to keep in mind as we read the New Testament that its authors weren't trying to pen historical biography as we now recognise it, and various attempts to separate the 'Jesus of history' from the 'Christ of faith' have failed. Either way, however, in terms of the details which all four accounts have in common, chief among them is the smell of the perfume filling the room. Hence, my theory is that it was this smell that triggered the memory of an event which did take place – the anointing of Jesus by a woman. It seems that this was followed by hostile reactions from the male bystanders, whether these were some of the disciples (as in Mark), or members of the religious authorities (as in Luke). In John's version, Mary was a close friend of his, but she wasn't necessarily the same Mary who discovered the empty tomb, adding yet another 'piece' to the puzzle of distinguishing between the many Marys! So, to prevent us getting too bogged down in such questions, let's focus on today's passage.

To put this narrative into context, Jesus and his friends were almost at the end of their long journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. They had reached Bethany, which is a small town a few miles outside the city. It was six days before Passover, that festival which reminded God's people of the key event in their history, up to that point – the Exodus from Egypt under Moses. The celebrations involved the sacrifice of a pure, unspoilt lamb, and the sharing of the story amongst families,

as they gathered to remember God's deliverance out of oppression. Now, immediately prior to the reading we've heard today, Jesus had raised his friend Lazarus from the dead, and was staying with Mary, Martha, and their freshly-healed brother for a few days. His actions, in undertaking the most spectacular of the signs and wonders found in John's Gospel, divided opinion between those who subsequently believed in, and flocked to, him (John 11:45, 12:17 – 19) on the one hand, and those plotting to get rid of Jesus by any means necessary on the other (11:47 – 53). If he intended to keep a low profile before the festival, this wasn't the best way to go about it!

During this visit, in which Martha famously did most of the hard work while her sister sat at Jesus's feet (like the student of a Rabbi), Mary performed an incredibly extravagant act of love – taking a pound of expensive perfume, that cost roughly what a labourer would expect to earn in a year, she anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. It's interesting to note that the Greek used for *wipe* is the same word John uses to describe Jesus washing his disciples' feet, so it's possible that Mary inspired this act of service. However, while Jesus taking a role usually performed by servants was unsettling for Peter and others, this was nothing compared to letting Mary do something normally only acceptable within the intimacy of marriage. Her action scandalised even men used to Jesus's crossing boundaries, and so while Judas's reaction might've been about the common purse (that he used to steal from) not being swollen by the sale of this perfume, I wonder if his problem was actually with the sensual nature of what Mary did for her friend?

Either way, the aroma of that perfume Mary lavished on Jesus filled the room, and surrounded everybody with a taste of her outrageous love. The smell contrasted with the putrid stench that stemmed from Lazarus's tomb, after four days in there, and her intimate touch with Judas's kiss of betrayal. Perhaps this episode was the last straw for Judas, and the point at which he had decided to conspire with those

within the Temple establishment looking for an opportunity to arrest Jesus. Had he just seen and heard too much for him to put up with? It is certainly the first time the Gospel writer makes Judas' intentions clear, and in verse seven, Jesus makes a connection with the cross. Hence, whether she intended it or not, Mary had anointed him ready for burial. In this sense, her actions were prophetic, pointing toward the ultimate extravagant out-pouring of love, as Jesus opened wide his arms upon the cross, and embraced our fragile and broken world in love. This puts debates about giving to the poor, which have been argued either way from this text, into perspective; if we are called to love as God first loved us, that requires both worship and service.

So, what are we to make of all this today? Well, there is much to be said in the light of this reading, but for now, I'd like to leave you with three brief thoughts to ponder. Firstly, notice how Jesus doesn't get drawn into an argument with Judas about limited resources, and the need for charitable giving. It (hopefully) won't surprise you too much to learn that I disagree with those commentators down the centuries who've used this reading to argue against a concern for the poorest and most vulnerable in society. However, there's a tension between giving to others and keeping the show on the road in terms of church buildings, and staffing, and the like. Keeping an eye on the 'balance' between the two matters. Secondly, Mary breaks with conventions, and crosses boundaries, to demonstrate her extravagant and costly love for Jesus. Are we willing to do the same today, especially when that risks triggering the censure of others? Thirdly, what do we smell like? I don't mean literally, but in terms of the fragrance of love which comes from us as Christ's disciples – do we fill up rooms with grace, compassion, and genuine hope, in the midst of these confusing and turbulent times? Or are we more like the stench from Lazarus' tomb, or the whiff of the corruption and hatred abroad in our world?

The bottom line is that God loves every single one of us so fully and extravagantly that nothing can separate us from that love – not even

the ultimacy of death may keep us apart from God's love, embodied in the living, dying, and rising again of Jesus Christ. And yet, if all of this is true for us, it is also true for everybody else, too. So, may the extravagant love of Christ shape everything we are, and do, so that everybody we come into contact with might know that they are loved beyond their wildest dreams, now and into eternity. Amen

### **Spiritual Exercise of the Week**

Prayer walking can be a great way to practice looking for God in the area you live, especially in unexpected peoples and places. You are invited to take a prayer walk in your local area this week.

### **Prayers of Intercession**

God of costly and self-giving love,  
as we journey onwards towards the cross of Christ  
and seek transformation for ourselves, and for your world,  
we bring our prayers for others to you.  
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those searching for light and hope right now,  
especially in hospitals or hospices, and all caring for them.  
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those across the world who live in conflict zones,  
and for refugees seeking sanctuary and life in other places.  
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those in positions of responsibility and authority,  
and everyone carrying the burden of others' expectations.  
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those longing to see Jesus for themselves,  
and all struggling to find God amid the turbulence of daily life.  
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those who are derided for being generous,  
and those whose lives will be changed by others' kindness.  
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those who are unwell, sad, isolated, or bereaved,  
and all finding it difficult to see any light at the end of tunnel.  
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

In a time of quiet and stillness,  
we bring the people and situations on our hearts to you...

### **Lord's Prayer**

### **Final Prayer – Collect for the Fifth Sunday of Lent**

Most merciful God,  
who by the death and resurrection of your Son, Jesus Christ,  
delivered and saved the world:  
grant that by faith in him who suffered on the cross,  
we may triumph in the power of his victory;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord,  
who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and forever. **Amen**

### **Blessing**

As you journey onwards in God's love,  
towards the foot of the cross of Christ,  
may you step forward boldly and act justly,  
so that through you, all may know that they matter.  
And the blessing of God,  
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,  
be upon you, and all whom you love and pray for,  
now and for ever. **Amen**