

# A moment of extravagance

## John 12.1-8

In an act of great passion, Mary anoints Jesus' feet with perfumed oil. While Judas criticises it as a lavish waste of money that could have been spent on the poor, Jesus defends it as a prophetic sign of his imminent burial.

**This week's resources explore:** ways of expressing devotion to Christ; a balance between worship and social action.

 Look out for ways to connect faith with everyday life.

## Bible notes

### Old Testament

#### Isaiah 43.16-21

As Isaiah announces that the Israelites' exile in Babylon is about to end (see Bible notes on page 18), he celebrates God's new act of salvation in terms that recall their exodus from Egypt and their journey through the wilderness. God looked after them then, and God will look after them now, restoring their original calling to be 'the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise' (v.21).

The importance of this calling was highlighted by the English and Scottish reformers who drafted the Westminster Catechism in the 1640s, saying: 'Man's chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever' [WEB](#). In what ways do we glorify and enjoy God? How might we develop our worship and grow in our devotion to God?

### New Testament

#### Philippians 3.4b-14

In Philippians 2, Paul described how Christ 'emptied himself' to take human form and die on the cross, before being exalted once again to reign with God. Here, Paul describes his own journey of faith in similar terms. He has emptied himself of all the things he once held so dear – his status, his zeal, his righteousness under the law – regarding them as rubbish now that he has found the 'righteousness... that comes through faith in Christ' (v.9). That is not the end of the story, however. He wants to keep moving forward towards his goal, which is 'to know Christ' (v.10), and to complete with him the rest of his journey through suffering and death to resurrection. For Paul, faith

is never static. If we are not moving forward, we are moving backwards – that is why he twice emphasises the importance of 'pressing on', constantly striving to keep on growing in Christ. Given the athletic imagery underlying the passage, we might like to reflect on our own levels of spiritual fitness, and set some specific training goals that will keep us moving forward.

#### Gospel John 12.1-8

In John's Gospel it is Mary of Bethany who anoints Jesus with perfumed oil. Presumably she had bought the nard to anoint her brother's body, but now that Lazarus has been raised from the dead she finds another purpose for it. Judas is shocked by her passionate display, and asks angrily whether the perfume should have been sold and the money given to the poor. Even though John doubts Judas' integrity, it is a fair question. Many of our churches are full of ornate statues and paintings that glorify God, but have we enhanced our worship at the expense of those in need? Our devotion to God needs to be held in tension with our calling to serve the poor.

Mary's action is prophetic in two ways. First, as Jesus says, it is a sign of his own imminent burial. Like the women who follow Jesus to the cross and the tomb, Mary does not look away as Jesus' suffering and death draw near. Second, this may well have been the act that inspired Jesus to wash his disciples' feet in the following chapter. Acts of love and kindness often prompt those who receive them to show the same love and kindness to others – and this infectious principle underlies the new commandment that Jesus then gives his disciples: 'Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another' (John 13.34).

## Lent 5

### Lectionary Bible readings

RCL Lent 5 Year C

Isaiah 43.16-21

Psalms 126

Philippians 3.4b-14

**John 12.1-8**

### The links between the lectionary readings

The season of Passiontide begins with three readings that examine our passion for God. In Isaiah, the emphasis is on worship. The Israelites are called once again to be the people God made them to be, 'so that they might declare the praises of God'. In Philippians, the emphasis is on faith. Paul celebrates the righteousness that comes through faith in Christ, and challenges us to keep on growing as that faith matures. In John, Mary's passionate act of anointing Jesus' feet is both a sign of his burial and an inspiration for him – and for us – to wash the feet of others.

[WEB](#) Notes on Psalm 126 and ideas for using it together.

### See [www.rootsontheweb.com](http://www.rootsontheweb.com)

**With very young children:** resources on the reading to use with under 5s.

**Children's Sheet** and **Colouring Sheet** (Welsh version available).

**Drama:** *I may not know much about art*

**Bible study:** a selection of this week's resources to print out.

# Prayers

**WEB** Welsh translations.

## Call to worship

Rejoice! God has done great things.  
Shout with joy for his goodness.  
Come and praise him for all that he is doing.

## A gathering prayer

With all our hearts, we come to worship you.  
With all our minds, we offer you our praise.  
With our whole being, we honour you.  
May all that we do, all that we say, all that we think and all that we feel, bring glory to you: our creator and redeemer.

**Amen.**

## A prayer of approach

Lord, guide us, as we press on towards the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

May we be single-minded in pressing ahead,  
May we be strong in persevering,  
and may we always be encouraged by you and your love.

**Amen.**

## A prayer of confession

Dear Lord, we are sorry for times when we have judged the actions of others without thinking about why they acted as they did.

We are sorry for times when we were so focused on our personal agenda that we failed to see that others have valid agendas too.

We are sorry for times when we have spoken out without thinking of the impact our words will have on others.  
Anoint us with your love, O Lord, that we may be forgiven.

We pray in Jesus' name.

**Amen.**

## A prayer of thanksgiving

For homes and food;  
for families and friends;  
for all that we often take for granted –  
generous God:

**we give you thanks and praise.**

For your loving presence in our lives;  
for strength and guidance;  
comfort and peace –  
generous God:

**we give you thanks and praise.**

For the gift of Jesus;  
for his living and teaching;  
for his healing and example;  
for his dying and rising –  
generous God:

**we give you thanks and praise.**

For all that you have done for us;  
for all that you are for us;  
for all that you will be for us –  
generous God:

**we give you thanks and praise.**

**Amen.**

## Prayers of intercession

Let us pray for all who serve their neighbours: we remember those who put their lives at risk in providing emergency services – ambulance, fire brigade, police, coastguard, medical, and others. Uphold and strengthen them, loving Lord.

Let us pray for all who serve their neighbours: we remember those so often taken for granted – those working in shops, cafes and restaurants. May they know that they are honoured and valued, generous God.

Let us pray for all who serve their neighbours: we remember those who travel overseas to work for aid agencies and charities. Give them wisdom and compassion, gracious God.

Let us pray for all who serve their neighbours: we remember those whom you call to serve you in the Church. May they be sustained by your unending love, anointing Lord.

Hear our prayers, in Jesus' name.

**Amen.**

## An active way into prayer

Explain that anointing is a way of honouring someone and showing they are valued. Pass round a bowl of fragranced oil, and invite everyone to dip their fingertips in lightly and then anoint the back of their neighbour's hand with one gentle stroke. Play some quiet music as this happens. Conclude by saying together: **Thank you for the extravagance of your love, O Lord, that values and honours us. Amen.**

## A prayer for all ages together

With our money and our resources –  
loving God:

**Help us to be generous.**

With our time and our talents –  
loving God:

**Help us to be generous.**

In friendship, companionship and friendship –  
loving God:

**Help us to be generous.**

In worship and service –  
loving God:

**Help us to be generous.**

In what we offer and who we are –  
loving God:

**Help us to be generous.**

May we respond to your extravagant love by sharing our love with you and one another. In the name of Christ.

**Amen.**

## A sending out prayer

Go and worship God in the world through your prayers, through your words, through your actions, and through your living. And know that he receives your love with joy.

**Amen.**

## A personal prayer

Worship and honour, glory and praise be yours, eternal God, today and always. Amen.

# Gather

## All-age introduction

A way to begin worship when all ages are present.

### Give my best

What can children do better than adults? Ask for a few suggestions that you could test out now. For example: Who can make the most noise? Run around the room the quickest? Be first to open a wrapped parcel? Jump the highest? Ask both the children and the adults to suggest why children are better at some things. Might it be because children are less inhibited? Adults are probably looking to see who is watching first, and thinking, 'Will I look silly?' Does it make a difference, at any age, if those watching are friends or strangers? In familiar places, and with people we know, we generally feel more relaxed, more able to be ourselves, more accepted. In today's Gospel reading, Jesus suggests that we can worship God in our own way, giving him our best, whatever our age or circumstances.

## With very young children

**WEB** Resources on the reading to use with under 5s.

# Open the Word

### To help the listener

The reader could use these words to provide context.

As the Passion of Christ draws near, today's readings challenge us to be more passionate in our worship, in our faith and in our devotion to Christ.

## Present the Old Testament

In this short passage, Isaiah refers twice to 'rivers in the desert' (in the NRSV, the second is translated 'water in the wilderness' but it is the same word in the Hebrew text). Nothing is more important than water to a people who had spent 40 years in the desert! The idea of God supplying freely flowing rivers is the equivalent of reaching the promised land – or heaven. To put this universal and timeless basic human need into context, before or after the reading, show a film clip or display some images from Oxfam Pioneers of projects that seek to provide water in the desert places of humanity **WEB**.

## Present the Gospel


**WEB** Script to print out.


This monologue is titled: 'From Lazarus' seat at the table'. It is a reflection, from Lazarus' perspective, on the events leading up to those described in this week's Gospel reading. It can be used to set the scene for the reading.


I never seem to get a word in. That's what comes of having two sisters! Even when I shuffled my way out of that tomb – and don't get me started on how weird that was – after they had unbound those grave clothes, I never got a chance to speak out. All those people crowding round me, asking questions: What had it felt like? Did I see the face of God? Did I know I was supposed to be dead? And not much has changed since. I've become something of a celebrity – an object of interest. And plenty of folk keep coming by the house, wanting to touch me. Today, Jesus is here again. *Script continues on the* **WEB**.


# Explore & respond


## Sermon ideas

**WEB** *PostScript*: Linking this week's reading to the news .

 On the journey towards Jerusalem, Jesus pauses for a meal in Bethany that John, usually minimalist in his writing, presents as a sacred moment full of stimulation to the senses. Martha is serving, her brother Lazarus is present, and their sister Mary engages with Jesus very publicly, showing her devotion by her action and her costly worship. She and Martha have equal reason to be grateful for the raising of Lazarus, and they show their gratitude in worship and action respectively. To which are we most drawn? Why? Assuming there is a place for both in our lives, how does that work out in practice?

 Jesus sees in Mary's action something prophetic. The fragrance is a reminder of burials in general and his coming death in particular. As Mary washes his feet, so he too will wash his disciples' feet, a lesson of what love really looks and feels like. How do we show those around us – especially those outside the church – what love looks and feels like today? What prophetic actions might we be drawn towards?

 Judas has his own agenda which, according to John, is more about personal gain than concern for the poor. On this occasion, Jesus declines to get involved in a discussion about charitable giving, and commends Mary for her costly worship. But, despite many interpretations through the centuries, Jesus' comments should not be taken as a manifesto regarding giving – or not – to the poor. Rather, it is about the true value and place of worship. We should be asking ourselves if our worship is the sort that fills the room – and the world – with its fragrance.

 Paul gives his testimony of what Jesus has done, what it means, and how it has changed him. Always extravagant in his contrasts, Paul 'throws in the bin' everything that gave him power and authority, counting all his training and achievement as just so much rubbish. In place of all that, he has the righteousness won for him by Jesus on the cross and in the resurrection. Christ has done all this. But he, Paul, still has more work to do to win the goal. What work do we still have to do?

## All-age conversation

A way for leaders to help all ages explore the reading.

During the weeks of Lent, we have been building ourselves up – training ourselves – in preparation for Easter. We have probably also learnt a few things along the way. What is the difference between training and learning? Let's think of some examples where we use each of the words. How might you complete this sentence: 'I am training for...'? Or this one: 'I am learning...'?

Or, what about the difference between 'learning about our Christian faith' and 'practising our Christian faith'? We often use 'practise' to describe what we are doing when we are learning – e.g. when we practise the piano. But practise really means preparing to perform, to do – as in 'putting it into practice'. Some things are said to be 'common practice' – meaning things we do regularly. Of course, we usually hope that the more we do something, the better it becomes!

So, what does it mean to 'practise our Christian faith' in the world? And what is it that our Lenten training is preparing us for, or to do? Today's Gospel story involves both worship (by Mary) and action (serving/caring, by Martha). Can we have one without the other? How might our church help us better to train or prepare for worship and for action in the world? Have we got the balance right? Which do we need to put more time/effort/energy into right now? How did Jesus get the balance right?

## Active worship

Ideas to engage different ages, learning and preferences and spiritual styles. Key: **W**ord, **E**motion, **S**ymbol, **A**ction. Find out more [WEB](#) in *Worship and learning support*.

### A simple worship activity for all ages

In this week's Gospel reading, Jesus prepares for what is to come in Jerusalem. Using all five senses, join him on the journey towards Jerusalem and the cross, beginning at the house of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. You will need these five items – in a larger congregation, use more than one set of items:

- 1 A perfumed handkerchief.
- 2 A circle (crown) made from a thorny branch.
- 3 A dish or cup of wine vinegar (to taste).

- 4 A small, rough, wooden cross.
- 5 A hammer and a piece of wood with a nail embedded in it.

Play or perform quiet music throughout (e.g. 'Were you there when they crucified my Lord?'). Pass round the five items, leaving time for people to reflect and pray silently about each one. Invite people to smell the handkerchief; feel the crown of thorns; taste the vinegar; look at the cross; and to hit the nail with the hammer, listening to its jarring sound. At the end, say, 'This is what Jesus endured for us: may he show us how we can truly live and worship our risen Lord. Amen.' **E S**

### Picture pointers [WEB](#)



Questions for reflection

- ▶ What do you see here: extravagance, showing off, or something else?
- ▶ How extravagant is the worship in your church?
- ▶ How do you express your devotion to Christ?

### Filled with fragrance

Pass round a variety of items that smell (e.g. a solid air freshener, a bar of soap, a jar of Vicks™, a sprig of a fragrant herb, a jar of curry powder). Invite people to share with their neighbours, or in groups, the response evoked by each fragrance – if it helps, suggest using phrases such as: 'it is like...' or 'it reminds me of...'. We can't always find the right words to describe smells. We have the same problem when talking about God! What smells might enhance your sense of worship? **E S**

### Faithful works

Numerous charities are doing 'good works'. Is there anything different about the ones doing so because they are Christian? Invite people to use phones to research two charities – one Christian, one not – and to compare the two. Is the end result the same for the recipients of aid? Does our faith affect our choice of which charities to support? **W A**

## Showing love

Give out small pieces of paper or card, and pens – and have a range of craft/card-making materials available. Ask: If Jesus came into your home, what would you do first? Put the kettle on? Phone a friend? Take a selfie with him?! Something else? Invite people to write or draw on their paper, or use the craft materials to create a card, that represents their choice. When complete, ask people to share with each other their choice – and to say why. **E S**

## Hymns & songs

Songs in italics are suitable for all ages.

\*Music links on [WEB](#).

*And after all*

And can it be that I should gain  
Beneath the cross of Jesus  
*Consider how he loves you*  
Firmly I believe and truly  
From a high secret shelf  
How sweet the name of Jesus sounds  
*I am the bread of life*  
*I believe in Jesus*  
*I know you love to crown the humble*  
Jesus, the very thought of thee  
*Jesus, you are, you are everything I'm not*  
*King Jesus, I believe*  
My hope is built on nothing less  
*My name is written on your hands*  
*Now I know there's a better way*  
*Our Father everlasting, the all creating One*  
Spirit of God, unseen as the wind  
These are the facts as we have received them  
*Veiled in humanness, nailed upon a tree*

## Send out

### Live your faith

Encourage everyone to put their faith into action. Use the suggestion below or distribute the **Live your faith** sheet [WEB](#).

Look for opportunities to give generously of time, money or possessions – and do so cheerfully, because God has given so much for you. **W E A**