

True worship

John 12.1-8

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How should we worship our Lord God?

According to John Stott, “true worship is the highest and noblest activity of which human beings, by the grace of God, are capable.”

But if it is that important, how must we worship our loving Father, our Savior Jesus, our Comforter, the Holy Spirit?

The Gospel reading of today gives us some direction to answer this question.

1. Mary’s love and joy

Mary is the central person in the event that St John describes. John himself was at that dinner party as an eyewitness.

Mary is the main person in the story – but interestingly, we do not hear her speak one word. We read words of John, and his interpretation of what happened at that dinner party. We hear words of Judas, that awful traitor. And we hear Jesus speak. But Mary is silent.

But we know a few things about her. She must have been deeply joyful when Jesus came to Bethany, because Jesus is the one who had raised her brother Lazarus from the dead, just very recently.



Many people had witnessed that moment when Lazarus came out of his grave; they saw that this happened at the command of Jesus: ‘Lazarus, come out!’

No wonder John, an eyewitness, recalls that “many of the Jews who [...] had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him.” (John 11.45)

More than anyone else, of course Martha and Mary believed in Jesus. He had given them their brother back. And now Jesus was in Bethany, close to them, and they loved him so much!

Jesus and his disciples were in the house, and they were enjoying their evening dinner. At a good party, people would not sit on chairs, but they would recline on sofas.

Those would be positioned in such a way that people would face the tables in the centre with their heads. Their feet were all

on the outside of the circle. They would rest on their left elbow, and with their right hand they would take the food from the tables in the centre.

In order to make sure that all guests always had enough to eat and drink, Martha was serving. That is how we have met her before in the Bible!

Martha showed her love for Jesus by working hard, by serving. That was her main language of love, and that is fine. Mary was more the person to quietly adore Jesus by being with him; that was her major love language.

In either case, both Mary and Martha were full of faith and love and joy - because of what Jesus had done and because Jesus was close to them again.

But I am not sure whether it was all joy for them. Just a few more days and Jesus would be killed. Murder was in the air. Just as hundreds of thousands of sheep were slaughtered, Jesus, the Lamb of God was to be killed. And He had often spoken about this to his friends – so Mary knew about it.

Mary poured the Nard, the precious ointment on Jesus, and Jesus accepts this extravaganza of love. Actually, he connects it with his burial, as if Mary embalms him ahead of the actual burial.

Most of the disciples did not seem to understand or believe those words of Jesus about his coming death. Mary seems to have understood.

Mary never speaks much; maybe she was a good listener and she understood what was about to happen to her beloved Lord.

Did Mary realize something of this sacrificial love of Jesus her Lord who was to die for human-kind? I think so. Her love for her Lord, was mixed with sadness.

And is that not the basis of our worship? We worship him for who he is and for what he has done for us. We love him, therefore we worship him. We are sad because He had to die for us; therefore we worship him.

2. Mary's worship

In any case, Mary's love and worship were extravagant. She gave Jesus massively much as an expression of what was in her heart.

This is true worship. Extravagant worship. Mary poured 300 denarii worth of Nard on the feet of Jesus. The Roman coin was called a denarius.



It was pure Nard, John writes. This came from the Himalayas, from Northern India. It had to be carried by camel for thousands of kilometers to the Indian coast; then it was taken by boat from the Indian coast to what is now Kuwait. Then it went again with camels via Iraq to Lebanon and Israel. This long trip made it very expensive.

300 denarii was the equivalent of a full year's salary.

Mary poured it all on the feet of Jesus. How valuable Jesus was for her! Her love for him, her worship for him, made her not think twice. All she had she gave to him. The word 'worship' was originally pronounced as 'worth-ship', it meant, how much worth do you attach to this or that thing or person.

What is the value of our Lord Jesus? Our service and our worship of our Lord can never be cheap; true service and worship are costly because our Lord is worth it. And He asks all from us. True love leads us to be very generous with God and with our fellowmen.

Usually balm would be poured over someone's head. Mary worshipped at the feet of Jesus, totally humble. Cleaning the feet of people was a slave's work. Mary even untied her hair – something no woman of respect would ever do in public in Israel.



It was seen as shameful really. But Mary was not concerned with what people might think. In her devotion for Jesus she lost all awareness of her environment. She did not care about her own honor; she laid even that at the feet of Jesus.

As Christians we can be so self-conscious about our faith in Christ, worried of what people may think. Well, true love does not worry so much, just as lovers may be sitting in a restaurant without caring what people around them say or do. They are lost in each other.

Mary's love for her Lord cost her everything. She did not calculate; she did not worry; she did not hesitate. Lavishly she poured not just her ointment but herself at Jesus' feet. 'Take my life and let it be, consecrated all to thee...'

Martha, Mary's sister, was working hard, serving at the table of Jesus. She expressed her love by those actions.

Martha must have laughed when Mary poured that precious Nard on the feet of Jesus. "Yes Lord, this is how much we love you. We work hard to serve you, we give you all we have to please you. Lord, we worship you!"

St Athanasius of Alexandria said this in one of his sermons:

Martha was taking great care with the service and was ministering to Christ with all her heart. Mary was seated at the feet of Jesus and kissing them... Christ beholds them both with his divine eyes and is glad and rejoices over the purity of the lifestyle and the offering to him of their undefiled service.

How much do you feel serving the Lord in your pocket? What of your possessions do you give to the work of our Lord? Look at your bank account and your payments, and you see what is truly valuable for you. How worthwhile God is to you. What value you attach to him.

“Is living your life for the sake of Jesus Christ not a waste of your time? Is giving your money for the sake of Jesus Christ not a waste of your money? Be reasonable! Sure, believe in God, but do not become extreme!”

Maybe you think this every now and then? How much may it cost you financially to follow Jesus Christ? How much time? How much of your life? True worship means giving us all.

St Paul writes in Romans 12.1, “I urge you brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices - this is your spiritual act of worship.” Offer your bodies, give your all.

3. Mary’s defence

Surely, Judas does not agree. He rejects the idea that our Lord deserves and demands all of our lives.

Jesus had given everything to Judas. He had been so gracious. Jesus had appointed Judas as an apostle; he had given him responsibility as the treasurer of the disciples; Jesus washed Judas’ feet; he made him share in his last meal.

Jesus did all he could to save Judas, but Judas’ heart had been petrified. From so much love of Jesus, any normal heart would melt. Not Judas. He was too greedy. He wanted too much for himself.

Tragic that Judas called this devotion of Mary a waste. Mary gave 300 denarii for the worship of Jesus; for only 10% of this, for 30 denarii, Judas betrayed Jesus a week later.

Mary did not defend herself when she was criticized for her love for Jesus. Jesus himself defended her. “Leave her alone”, he says.

Jesus is not at all against supporting poor people. He often tells his followers to do just that. If you have two shirts and someone is naked, give him your shirt. Our behavior to poor people should be marked by the same generosity as our love for God.



Whether like Martha we worship him by cleaning the house, or like Mary we worship at his feet, or whether we give financial support to the poor - do it as worship to your Lord and do it with all of your heart.

Jesus is critical of Judas because he proposes that support for the poor should take the place of love and worship and adoration of God.

Christian social activism, even that which meets real needs, sometimes masks a spirit that knows nothing of worship and adoration. Christian service to God must always have this adoration at its heart.

By the way, think about the defense of Mary by Jesus. Jesus claims that devotion and worship for him has priority over serving the poor.

If a normal man would claim such priority, we would assume that he has a mental disease or that he is unspeakably arrogant. But Jesus knew that he did deserve the same honor as God does. And therefore to honor him has priority over caring for the poor.

That is, by the way, even better for the poor. Honoring God actually purifies our motives for true service to the poor.

Adoration for Jesus Christ lifts him up, it humbles us, and it puts us in the place where we also have the psychological freedom to honor other people and lift them up. Then our help for the poor is not condescending, but uplifting for them. Because we are fully aware that we are not higher or better or more important than they are.

Conclusion

Jesus defends Mary, and so does John, who wrote the story as an eyewitness. John even remembered how the fragrance of the Nard filled the whole house. Her lovely deed to Jesus was pleasant for all, and even today we speak of it, honoring Mary for her love.

And we have to search our hearts and our lives. If our worship for our Lord Jesus does not equal that of Mary, is it because at the bottom, we do not share her love and thankfulness to Jesus? Because Jesus is not worthwhile enough for us?

Let us use these days of Lent to question ourselves and our motives; and let us learn to worship our Lord more extravagantly. He asks us to offer our selves as a spiritual sacrifice to him.

And what we do with our time, and our possessions, our money, is a very good thermometer. What we do with our money is a very precise indicator of the extent of our love and adoration for God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen.