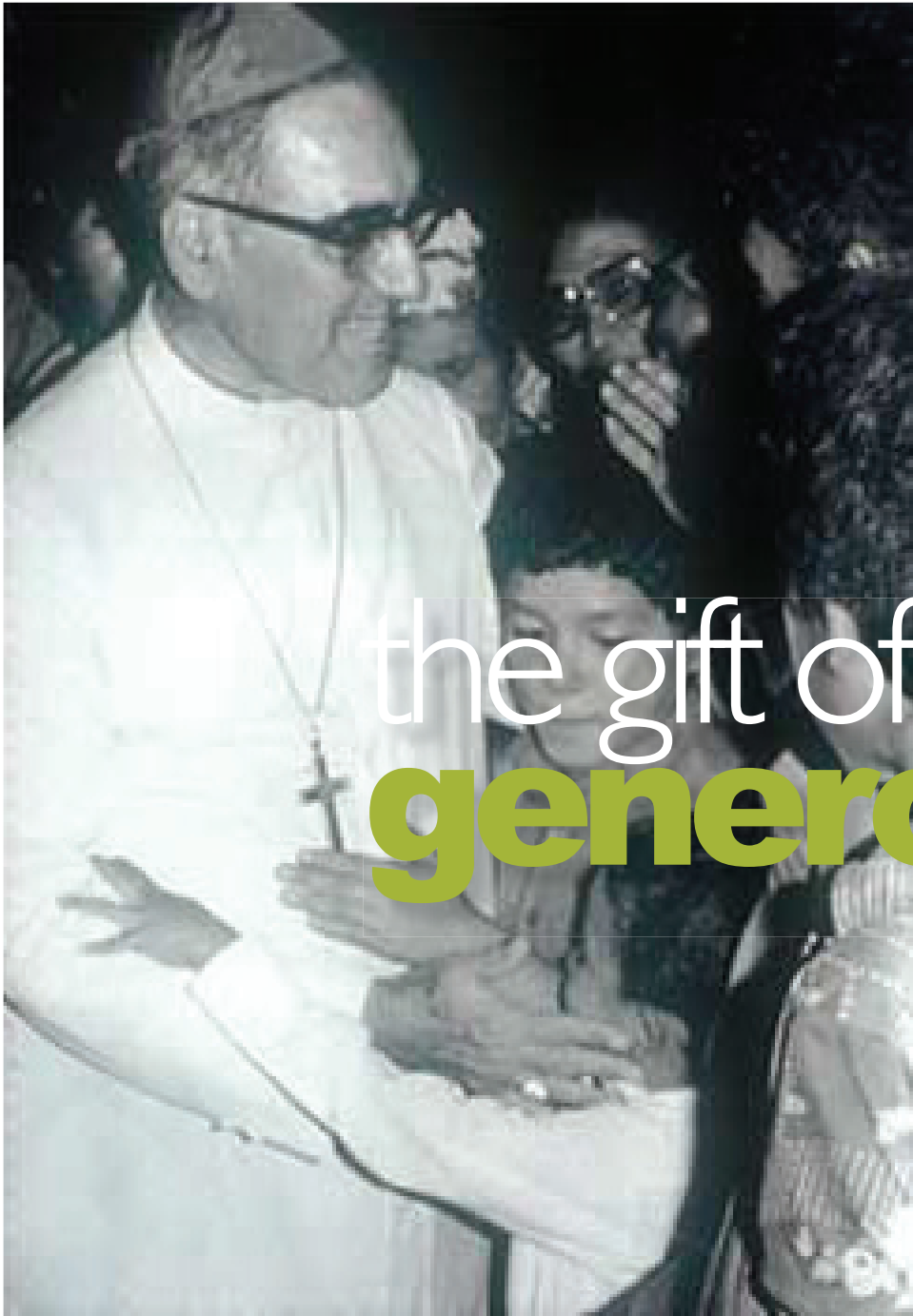


March 25, 2007



There are opportunities, sacred opportunities when we find ourselves on holy ground when we are called to move beyond ourselves simply because we care; simply because we love.

So much had happened in those three years since Jesus left the carpenter shop and stepped into the Jordan to be baptised by John. Times of prayer were mingled with long hours of

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teaching and preaching. Crowds gathered around him celebrating the new life they received through the touch of this man while pockets of protestors stood on the periphery plotting his demise. Ironically, this religious leader seemed to be able to better relate to the fishermen and tax collectors than those who congregated in the synagogues. His congregations were the searching, the needy, those open for something more. His pulpits were often the sea shore, the bow of a fishing boat, a mountain, a plain. And his message was to proclaim the love of God which never gives up on us, even when we are ready to give up on ourselves. He had experienced acceptance by many and changed their lives but had also known rejection by the powerful and the elite. In only three years, throngs of thousands would gather at the mere mention of his name but equally he would stand out as the biggest threat to the society and culture of which he was part. While it is true that his words and deeds were revolutionary, they were not like the zealots of his day who sought to overthrow their Roman oppressors with swords and insurrection. Rather, his words were boldly calling us to think in new directions. His demands stretched our comfort ability insisting that we learn to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. His example called for a new understanding of generosity by feeding the hungry, offering hope to the troubled and proclaiming the promise of eternity to those who were dying. The world often does not know how to receive such gifts of true gen-

erosity. It does not know how to take those who freely give, expecting nothing in return. It did not know how to take Jesus and rather than seeing him as gift and blessing, he was viewed with suspect, suspicion and threat. On this the 5th Sunday in Lent, just one week before Palm Sunday, we find Jesus outside the city of Jerusalem in the hamlet of Bethany. He was there, with his disciples, visiting friends -visiting, perhaps next to Joseph and Mary, the most famous family in the New Testament - that of the siblings Martha, Mary and Lazarus. Like many of the Biblical characters, we do not know the story behind the story -how they came to Jesus and to faith in the first place. But what we do know is that they were special people in his life. You may remember the Gospel accounts of Martha's 'doing' and Mary's 'being' and the story of Jesus' most famous miracle - the healing of Lazarus, bringing him back from the dead. But perhaps what was most important, at least for this trip, was the friendship and the caring which had developed. This family was able to offer Jesus a place where he could be himself -where he could kick off his shoes, lean back and not have to be "on" all the time. It was a place where he could prepare himself, physically, mentally and spiritually for what would become his last trip to Jerusalem. Did Jesus know exactly what awaited him when he was to enter that walled city? Did he know of the anguish of the garden, the agony of the whip, the cross and crucifixion? Did he know that the resurrection was wait-

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ing to occur? These are questions of endless theological debate, something like how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. The fact is however that there is no real way of knowing and, in the end, it does not really matter that much anyway! What we do know is that Jesus knew the mounting tide against him. He was aware of the plotting of his death and what better time for this act to be done than during Passover. And what better place than in Jerusalem.

Jesus went to Jerusalem with eyes wide open. I have had the privilege of being in the tiny Central American county of El Salvador on different occasions. In this predominately Roman Catholic nation, the name of Archbishop Oscar Romero is frequently heard and seen. Yesterday, March 24th, marked the 27th anniversary of the assassination of his death yet his spirit is strong.

In an article on Romero's life, Dr. Victor Shepherd writes . . . knowing himself (Romero) to be on the Government's hit list, he went to the hills to prepare himself for his final confrontation with evil. He telephoned his farewell message to Mexico's premier newspaper, insisting that like the good shepherd, a pastor must give his life to those he loves. A short time after, while conducting the funeral of a friend's mother, he was shot and killed by an assassin's bullet.

This, no doubt, was Jesus' space as he paused at his friend's home for an overnight stay. He too was on the Government's hit list. He too had to prepare himself for this final confrontation with evil!

Our Gospel lesson tells of this visit . . . six days before the Passover. This was not an easy trip for Jesus. Just a few days later, we will find him praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Father, let this cup pass from me – God is there any other way?" Too often we gloss over Holy Week moving from through the 40 days of Lent and then from Palm Sunday to Resurrection day. Perhaps we need to be more mindful of the struggle that Jesus battled, both within and beyond. Perhaps we need to better understand the sacrifice, the violence, the suffering. The cross is more than jewellery hung around the neck. It was Jesus' final confrontation with evil!

There, in his friend's home, Jesus remained, enjoying a meal, perhaps voicing his fears, lifting up his anxiety. He had been given a negative prognosis, a limited future and it is never easy to say goodbye.

Martha cooked up a storm. It was what she did best. Lazarus sat beside Jesus at the table sharing stories, enjoying fellowship and then suddenly, spontaneously, Mary enters the room with costly perfume. She pours it on the feet of Jesus and spreads it into the cracks and crevasses with her hair. Foot washing was important. Sandalled shoes and dusty roads were hard on the feet and such a massage would have brought comfort and relief while filling the whole house with aromatic delight.

Again, we can look at the symbolism of this act. Such perfume was often used for anointing the body at death and hence some

see this as a foreshadowing of the crucifixion. Remembering within the Hebrew culture, burials were to be held before the setting of the sun, having such precious perfume in the house would be like prepaying funeral experiences. Some commentators speculate that this might have been left from Lazarus' death and now no longer needed for Jesus had given him new life.

Although any and all of these things might be true, I imagine that all that was going through Mary's mind at that time was Jesus' struggle and she wanted to reach out to him in his need. This was a spontaneous act. Had Mary planned this action in advance, she would not have used her hair to spread the perfume but a clean cloth or other suitable item. No, what we see here is Mary feeling Jesus pain and her desire to let him know she knew ; to bring comfort to the Comforter, to give in response to the deep love, the deep faith and indeed to the deep pain she felt at the thought of losing him. This was an act of generosity, an act of caring - giving and expecting nothing in return. After Jesus had ministered to others for the past three years, now Mary was the minister. Mary was ministering unto Jesus.

I am always concerned when I hear someone say following a tragedy. She'll be all right. He'll be okay. They're strong people. The reality is few of us are really that strong. We all need encouragement and support; strength from above for sure, but also the strength that comes from those around us; those who are willing to journey with us,

to love us even and perhaps especially in extravagant ways. Mary's action did not change Jesus' situation. He still was on his way to the cross. But she changed his heart. The depth of this action and its impact upon Jesus can be found in his words . . . "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

These words are often taken out of context. Jesus was not putting down the poor . The Bible is full of references of just the opposite. Rather what Jesus was saying is today, I know you felt my pain. You understand! He was acknowledging his own needs, his own struggles and the comfort that comes through reaching out in extravagant love. Now Judas also has a role to play in this story. He held the money and when he saw Mary's actions he was incensed "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" Luke's mind was tainted by Judas's later act of betrayal as is apparent by the gospel writer's editorial comment (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Yet I have some sympathy for this disciple. Perhaps it is the fact that I was an accountant in a former life. Even today as I walk around some of the beautiful cathedrals in Europe and England while one part of my brain is overcome with the beauty and splendour, another part is asking the question 'How much does it cost to heat this place?' When I look at this place, with our high aspiring

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ceilings and the beautiful stone structure and stained glass windows, I sometimes ask the same question

Then take a step back and come to the realization, as Mary did, that God is worth it, faith is worth it. Perhaps we would build this church differently today but because of the love and devotion of our forebearers, thousands upon thousands have experienced the faith in this place and this place is truly a symbol of extravagant love.

Churches and faith institutions must do their part. If our main activity is to always act in an extravagant manner on ourselves then we have lost sight of our mission to bring, share and live the love of Christ in the world. For as often as we reach out to others, Jesus says, you are reaching out to me! Yes Judas, the poor are important and should never be forgotten.

But what Jesus was also saying this is a time and a place for extravagance. There are opportunities, sacred opportunities when we find ourselves on holy ground when we are called to move beyond ourselves simply because we care; simply because we love. This church is here because nearly 200 years ago there were those who loved God so much, they wanted us to have a centre of worship. You see, you don't build a structure to last 200 years for yourself. You build it for those who will follow. Extravagant love perhaps, but as Jesus was touched by Mary's extravagance, so too should we be touched by the faith of those who have gone before and who so freely.

What are those times of extravagance within the church? Perhaps they occur when one is willing to sit with another and be with them in difficult times. Perhaps it is in helping to sponsor a family who need to escape their homeland. Perhaps it is in some random act of kindness or simply listening to the passion of your heart. Perhaps it is taking dinner to a neighbour or making a one time generous gift to a cause that you believe in. Perhaps it is such radical acts, as loving your enemies, praying for those who persecute you or forgiving others as we ourselves have been forgiven. Perhaps it is pouring expensive perfume over the feet of Jesus - doing something for someone else and expecting nothing in return.

Recently I was involved with some others in helping an non church family through a difficult situation. Working together we were able to make a difference and the woman came to me asking how much she should pay us. My response to her was simple. There is no cost. That is what Church people, acts of radical hospitality, acts of radical.

The world did not understand Jesus and so it is not surprising that all would not understand those who seek to follow him. But, perhaps our job is not so much to be understood as it is to love - to love as Jesus loved . . . to love as Mary loved . . . to love extravagantly as God first loved us. We see it is the perfume poured on Jesus' feet and we see it in the cross on which he hung. We see it in the sacrifices made in the construction of this building so that some 200 years later,

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we might still have a church and  
we see it whenever we reach out  
to others expecting nothing in  
return for that's what Christians  
are called to do.

And they'll know we are Chris-  
tians by our love, by our love  
Yes, they'll know we are Chris-  
tians by our love

### **Biblical References**

Isaiah 43:16-21  
John 12:1-8

### **The Author**



**Rev. Dr. William ("Bill") D. Smith** is the Minister of Bridge Street United Church in Belleville, Ontario, Canada. He can be reached at Tel. +1 613 962 9178, extension 73, or by email at [wsmith@bridgestchurch.com](mailto:wsmith@bridgestchurch.com)