**The Ven Dr Amanda Bloor, Archdeacon of Cleveland, reflects on John 12.1-8 for the Fifth Sunday in Lent, 6th April.**

Have you ever been at a formal occasion where something unexpected has happened, and no one has quite known how to deal with it? We can easily become flustered, embarrassed, or even quite cross because social norms have been crossed or boundaries transgressed. Even things that couldn't have been helped, like sudden illness or an accident, become loaded with difficulty because of the situation in which they've happened.

I was in the congregation in a church many years ago, long before I was ordained, when the elderly priest taking the service stumbled and hit his head hard on the stone altar rail. We were all paralysed with indecision for a few moments - not because we didn't care, but because we were in worship. Was it appropriate to stop the service while someone called an ambulance and gave first aid? Or should someone take him quietly to the vestry and mop up the bleeding, while we carried on with taking communion as if nothing had happened? The answer, by the way, if you find yourself in that situation, is yes, always stop and give proper help. People matter and God will understand.

So, when I read today's gospel passage where something completely extraordinary happens at a formal dinner party, I can sympathise with the mixed emotions in the room. Jesus is the guest of honour at dinner. There are lots of people there, including his disciples. The food has been served and there's probably some polite conversation going on. People will have been on their best behaviour. And then, without warning, Mary steps forward with a pot of fabulously expensive and highly perfumed essential oil and begins to rub it into Jesus's feet. That's such an intimate thing to do, but I imagine many will have been as shocked by the physicality of it, as they are by the expense. And then she uses her hair to wipe away the excess, how embarrassing.

We see glimpses of what's going on around the table; Judas is angry, and he's probably not the only one. But Jesus hints at why Mary is behaving in this way. He says there will always be things that need doing, and people who need help. But this kindness matters now, because I'm not going to be here forever.

Now, I don't think for a moment that Jesus is suggesting that the poor don't matter. Everything he's done in his ministry shows that the poor and the neglected matter most. But he's reminding those around him, and us, that we have to treasure the people who mean a lot to us whilst they're still around.

It's easy to take our loved ones for granted, to assume that they'll always be there. Jesus knows that his death is rapidly approaching, and I think he's grateful that Mary is showing him both kindness and love. And I'm sure that after the horror of the crucifixion, Mary was glad that she'd taken that opportunity to offer some comfort and gentleness whilst she still could.

Let's pray. Jesus, who faced death for the love of us, help us to be more like Mary. Help us to show that we care, and to be unafraid to let those we love know how much they matter. Fill us with your love, so that we can share that love with others. Amen.