

## SERMON, ST. JOHN'S LENT V

Today's Gospel reading from John is a strange one. Jesus is at dinner in the home of his dear friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus of Bethany. It is six days before the Passover and, as she was wont to do, Martha is serving, while Lazarus, just recently raised from the dead, is at table with Jesus and his disciples, including the betrayer, Judas Iscariot. Mary, the contemplative, and likely most eccentric of the siblings, we are told, "took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair." The strangely erotic image of this woman wiping the Lord's feet with perfumed ointment is heightened by at least one tradition that this Mary was none other than Mary Magdalene, believed by some to be a repentant prostitute. The Gospel of Luke, for example, has a similar story of a woman anointing Jesus' feet with costly ointment and she is simply said to be a "sinful woman." The sensuousness of the scene continues with the seemingly irrelevant comment that "the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume." Nard, or "spikenard," according to my trusty Wikipedia, is "an aromatic amber-colored essential oil derived from *Nardostachys jatamansi*, a flowering plant in the honeysuckle family," native to Nepal, China and India. The oil was traditionally used for perfume or medicine and was exceedingly expensive. As Judas Iscariot questions sarcastically, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" Three hundred denarii was a huge amount of money, roughly the yearly wages of a Roman legionary! Judas has a point and, though the Gospel writer insists that he didn't really care for the poor because he was thief, this still doesn't justify such wanton wastefulness. Nor does Jesus' response help much either: "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." It looks, suspiciously, like Jesus is enjoying this massage from a beautiful woman too much to care about the consequences for the poor. A strange and counter-intuitive passage indeed!

This is, indeed a difficult passage, but I've spoken before of finding God in the hard places, the jewel in the proverbial scriptural dungpile! And that jewel is here if we only begin to understand the rich symbolic nature of the entire Gospel of John. Let's begin by thinking about our very first impressions of this story. What immediately comes to mind for you when you hear it? I hear some themes rather **un**characteristic of most New Testament narratives: extravagance, exuberance, pleasure, sensuousness, intimacy, even (dare I say?) eroticism. One point the Gospel writer is making here is the very sensual nature of the Incarnation, the "enfleshment" of God among us; John is, after all, the one who begins his Gospel with possibly the most important words in all the Bible, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Jesus' full humanity is presented to us in this beautiful story: real humanity in all its earthy sensuousness: touch, scent, and the deep pleasure of human kindness, warmth, and generosity. Mary's anointing reveals that the Incarnate Word of God is the Son of Man, born among us as a child of the poor, one with us in all that it means to be human, including the joy of friendship and the sensual pleasure of being touched by another person. And Mary pours out her **all** in love for her friend, as a good friend does, right? Nothing is good enough for the ones we truly love.

But the context of this passage is highly significant. Jesus has just raised Mary's brother, whom he dearly loved, to life. The religious authorities heard about this and, out of fear and

jealousy of Jesus' power among the people, began to plot his death. Jesus then approaches Jerusalem and stays in the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus at Bethany, a suburb of the Holy City, and Mary's anointing takes place the day before Palm Sunday, his Triumphal Entry and the beginning of the Way of the Cross. So, here we have, of course, the foreshadowing of his death, which is the fullest testimony of the Incarnation: Jesus, the Son of God, not only is born among us, lives among us, sharing the fulness of our humanity, but he suffers **our** suffering, he dies **our** death. He is on the cross with his suffering and dying creation since the beginning of time and so the Cross is the ultimate and inevitable consequence of Incarnation. Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet prefigures Jesus' washing of his disciples' feet at the Last Supper, a sign that just as he came to serve us, so must we serve one another. However, her anointing at Bethany also foreshadows the anointing required by Jewish law for the burial of the dead, the anointing that Jesus didn't receive at his own burial because it took place on the eve of the Sabbath, when any activity considered "work" was forbidden. Jesus, in fact, states clearly to Judas: "Leave her alone. She bought it (the ointment) so that she might keep it for the day of my burial." It is not accidental that Judas, the betrayer, is the only disciple named in this story, for this exquisite image of human tenderness is overshadowed by the spectre of hatred and betrayal, darkness and death.

But here amidst the signs of death, there are hints of resurrection hope. In the previous chapter, when Jesus commands that the tomb of Lazarus be opened, Martha poignantly says to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days." This stench of a decaying corpse is contrasted here with the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus "filled with the fragrance of the costly perfume." Fragrance as a sign and foretaste of resurrection! Moreover, it is highly significant that Lazarus, the man he raised from the dead, is present at the anointing: resurrection light already illuminating the darkness of betrayal and death. I am reminded of those glorious words in our funeral liturgy: "All of us go down to the dust, yet even at the grave we make our song, "Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!"

One thing that struck me for the first time upon re-reading this passage is that there is also a Eucharistic theme. This whole scene takes place in the context of a **dinner**, the implications of which would have been especially clear to the earliest Christians who were fundamentally a Eucharistic community. We are told, after all, in the Road to Emmaus story that "they knew him in the breaking of the bread." Here we have all that constitutes Eucharist: the representation of Christ's death and resurrection and the love in community and the costly self-giving that results from our Eucharistic gathering. Like Mary, we are called to give our all for Christ's Body, which is not just the Church, but all humanity, indeed, all creation. Anointing is not only a sign of death, but of healing, and we are called to go forth from this place to be healers of one another and of God's broken earth.

Finally, I would be remiss if I didn't reflect on Jesus' enigmatic and troubling response to Judas' criticism that the money from the sale of this ointment could be given to the poor. It's only mildly helpful to be told by the Gospel-writer that "He said this not because he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief." We know that Judas is the archetypal thief and betrayer, but he has a point, right? It's quite alarming to hear from Jesus' mouth the words, "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." One commentator, probably correctly, suggests that here Jesus is meditating from an OT verse in Deuteronomy, which commands generosity

precisely **because** “there will never cease to be some in need on the earth.” However, I believe that John is telling us here that Judas misses the point by focusing on just one act of generosity, a demonstration of a partial and token act of giving. You and I can fall into this trap when we send a few dollars to a charity that serves the hungry, yet are miserly in our love for others or unforgiving and uncharitable in a multitude of other ways. Mary represents total and complete self-giving in the manner of God who gave us his all in Christ, emptying himself of divinity to share in our humanity, including our suffering and our death. Mary stands for every Christian, called to “love as he first loved us” and to give nothing less than our **all** for Christ, and if for Christ, then for all the world.