



Revd Ro's Reflection on Tuesday of Holy Week

John 12. 1-11

We come now to the anointing of Jesus by Mary at Bethany.

The different gospels have different accounts of a similar event. In John, the reading we are examining, the meal is at the home of the newly raised Lazarus and the woman who pours out the perfume is Mary, his sister.

In Matthew and Mark it occurs at Bethany but in the home of Simon the Leper and she is simply 'a woman'. In Luke it is again at Simon's house this time he is identified as a Pharisee and the woman as 'a sinner', usually interpreted as meaning a prostitute but it is much earlier in Jesus' ministry.

That of course is why the identity of the woman is confused. It is actually why Mary Magdalene got the reputation of being a prostitute. There is absolutely no biblical evidence for this. What

happened is that Pope Gregory 1st in 591 identified the 'sinful woman' in Luke as Mary Magdalene!

Luke's account could be another similar event near the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Of one thing we

can be sure - this event in Passover week took place in Bethany. John is quite specific; it is Mary the

sister of Lazarus who pours the perfume over Jesus' feet. He is specific over the timing too; it takes

place, 'Six days before the Passover.' That's important, the anointing by Mary takes place only a

week before the Last Supper. Jesus knows what road lies ahead of him. He knows what awaits him.

Just now before going into the bear pit which is Jerusalem, before his enemies can strike he needs

rest and he finds it at Bethany. Bethany is some two miles from the city. Jerusalem would have been

heaving with people, there would have been nowhere available to stay there. Of course Jesus retires

to Bethany. It is relatively safe. He is with his good friends and he can get some blessed peace before

his ordeal.

Jesus is with Lazarus whom he has just raised from the dead. We have seen how fond Jesus is of

him, phrases like, 'Jesus wept' and 'he was greatly disturbed' show us that.

Very few characters in the gospels are as fully delineated as Martha and Mary. We have seen Martha and Mary before in the famous story where Martha, ever active, is scolded by Jesus because she

wants Mary to lend a hand. I have to confess to having a great deal of sympathy for Martha. Actually

if you think about it we all serve as best we can and in the way that suits our characters. Not

everyone can preach any more than everyone can do the church accounts! Martha is doing things

for Jesus in her way. She is getting him a meal. Mary is more contemplative, she is listening to him with rapt attention. But Martha is out of line in trying to make Jesus ask Mary to 'do it her way.' 'But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.'⁴¹ But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; ⁴²there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.' We see Mary's character here quite clearly; she sits at Jesus' feet and listens with fixed attention and love.

We see the sisters again at the raising of Lazarus and as I said yesterday Martha, once again active, shows huge faith in Jesus.

'I am the resurrection and the life, those who believe in me, even though they die will live. And whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?' That's the stunning question. Just look at Martha's response. 'You are the Christ the Son of God.'

Now in the episode from John 12 the spotlight is on her sister Mary once more. The pattern is similar to the former time Jesus spent at their home.

² 'There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him.'

Note it is Martha who serves and one wonders whether she has learned Jesus' lesson regarding her sister. Either way Jesus is at rest with friends. Then suddenly the tone changes, into this blissful domestic scene comes Mary. Her action is amazing,

³ 'Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair.

Note she anoints his feet only in Matthew, and in Mark the woman anoints his head. This is not incidental, Mary shows the utmost humility.

Jesus knows Mary well. Had she been a stranger to him, as with the other accounts, what she does would be quite scandalous. It is surprising enough among friends. She lets down her hair. Even now we talk about 'letting your hair down' meaning to be totally without any artifice, to be totally relaxed but in that culture it was an impossibly shocking thing to do. A woman's hair would be covered and tied up in modesty. It simply was not possible to untie it before others. Yet she does. It would be familiar to say the least of it. Having poured out the perfume on his feet she literally begins caressing them and drying them with her hair. That is such an intimate action as to be unthinkable in public especially to a young rabbi, and it was public, the disciples were present. We unlike the disciples see this as Jesus did it is a spontaneous outpouring of love.

As she pours the perfume, pure spikenard- on his feet we are told, 'The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.' What a beautiful line, it is symbolic too, it's as if everything was touched and purified by it. That is the atmosphere for a few seconds, love and beautiful scent.

The moment is wrecked by Judas' outburst. Judas is just angry; he brings ugliness into the beautiful atmosphere.

⁴ 'But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?'

Notice how John points forward to the betrayal. People would feel scorn and disgust at Judas because of his behaviour later. Judas didn't care about the poor and we are told he stole from the 'common purse'. Is it jealousy too I wonder, that is the besetting sin of the Pharisees et al. One

wonders what is going through Judas' mind just now. For some reason he must feel let down by Jesus to commit the sin he was about to.

⁷Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'

This prefigures Judas' action in the betrayal. Jesus underlines this as he speaks of his burial. It prefigures the crucifixion just as surely as the raising of Lazarus prefigures the resurrection.

Mary has anointed him now –soon his execution as a common criminal will follow.

⁹ 'When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ¹⁰So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, ¹¹since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.'

Jesus came to Bethany for peace and affection; he got it but only briefly. Judas' action sours the occasion but worse is to follow. Now the crowds follow to see the man Jesus raised and Jesus who performed the miracle. Now the malice is out in the open. Such an action on Jesus' part, as far as the chief priests are concerned, means Jesus has to die and if possible Lazarus the evidence of his action.

Passions will soon beat around Jesus on angry wings and they continue to do so until they carry him to the cross. Throughout these few days he cuts through convention and religious hypocrisy relentlessly teaching the true word of God until he is dragged to Calvary. But from Mary to the thief on the cross he is touching and transforming lives. Mary we have no doubt; will follow him to the end. This we know - her life is inextricably bound with her saviour. Our minds are still with Mary, with Jesus and with love. Jesus has filled her life as the perfume fills the house.

So may he fill our lives as we walk with him this Passiontide and throughout our lives.

Lord Jesus Christ fill our lives this Holy Week. Help us to respond fully to your love. We recognise our faults and we ask you to help us live more authentically as your disciples. May we offer our lives as best we can as a joyful outpouring of thanksgiving and a spontaneous expression of praise to you and in love to all.

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