

## **BACKGROUND & REFLECTION: 13 March 2016**

**(Bible reading: John 12:1-8)**

### **BACKGROUND**

Our reading in John is quite unique and different from all the other Gospels' account of the same story. It is clear that John had his own agenda.

Mark and Matthew report an anointing of Jesus' head whereas Luke and John speak of the anointing of his feet. Moreover, whereas Bethany (likely to be in Judea) is mentioned in connection with the anointing in Matthew, Mark, and John, the setting in Luke, although not mentioned, would appear to be in Galilee, since that was where Jesus was reportedly doing his early ministry at the time. Furthermore, the particular site of the reception is said in Matthew and Mark to be the house of Simon the leper while in Luke it is the home of a Pharisee named Simon.

In John we are told that Jesus was in "Bethany where Lazarus lived" and that, at the dinner, Martha was serving, and Lazarus was at the table. So we might suppose that the dinner was in the home of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, although this is not stated (John 12:1–2). Furthermore, in John the event is placed chronologically six days before Passover (12:1), whereas in Matthew (26:2) and Mark (14:1) it is recounted following a meeting of the Jewish leaders two days before Passover.

In addition, the woman who anointed Jesus is described by Luke (7:37) as a sinner and contrasted with the self-righteous Pharisee who organized the meal; but there is no such description in Matthew and Mark, and the woman remains virtually unidentified beyond the deed she did. John, on the other hand, identifies her as "Mary" (12:3), whom we assume to be the sister of Lazarus and Martha.

The Sabbath had apparently passed because Martha, the sister known in Luke 10:40–41 for her engagement in kitchen duties, was hard at work in serving the meal. It is important to note here that the Johannine picture of Martha is quite consistent with the Lukan portrayal of her. So also is the picture of Mary, who is interested more in the relationship to Jesus than with pots and pans.

So let us look at the text:

Our reading takes place 6 days before the Pascha or Passover. The Passover was a Jewish festival in commemoration of God's sparing the Jews when He destroyed the firstborn of the Egyptians. It was celebrated on the fourteenth day of the month Nisan. In later times the Jews made some additions. In particular they drank four cups of wine at various intervals during the paschal supper, the third of these cups, called the cup of benediction. Passover is sometimes called the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

Jesus was in Bethany, a village at the Mount of Olives, about two miles (3 km) from Jerusalem, on or near the normal road to Jericho. It was the hometown of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha where Jesus often stayed and where Lazarus was raised from the dead. It was also the home of Simon the leper.

Jesus was the guest of honour at a meal with Lazarus and his two sisters.

Mary anoints the feet of Jesus with a lavish show of generosity. In antiquity it was the custom of washing and anointing the feet of strangers and guests. Such washing was usually done by the lowest slaves, but sometimes by the master himself in a token of respect. The Jew was accustomed not only to rubbing his head with oil or ointment at feasts in a token of joy, but also both the head and the feet of those whom he wished to distinguish by special honour. In the case of sick persons and also of the dead, they rubbed the whole body.

Mary used a "litron" of pure nard oil. The Roman "litra" or "libra" was divided into twelve ounces and was equivalent to about a pound. She used "nard oil" which was extracted from a plant that grows in India, the root of which is very small and slender and which puts forth a long thin stalk with several ears or spikes at ground level, thus giving it the name of spikenard. It was a highly prized and very aromatic.

No wonder Judas had a fit. I mean why spend so much money? They could have used it for the poor.

Why was it not sold for 300 denarii? Denarius, or the dēnárion rendered as "penny," is the most frequently mentioned coin in the gospels. It was the most important Roman coin which circulated throughout the empire

and with which all public accounts were tallied. It seems as if the ointment that Mary used is valued at three hundred denarii, which sum probably represents at least the annual income of a labourer of those days. This appears also true from the parable of the labourers in the vineyard in Matt. 20:1–15 where a denarius is evidently considered liberal pay for a day's work of twelve hours beginning at 6 a.m. and ending at 6 p.m.

And then we get John's agenda of pointing out the real character of Judas Iscariot. He is a thief and a robber, one that helped himself to the money that was put in their moneybag or box. He was not really concerned about the poor. He could have done with 300 denarii in his pocket.

And then Jesus says to him to leave her alone as she did something that signals what is to become of Him. And yes in no uncertain terms is Jesus telling them all that He will not be with them on earth for eternity. He also alludes to Deuteronomy 15:11, which urges generosity to the poor, who will always be in the land. He thus does not play down giving to the poor but plays up his impending death; he must be his followers' first commitment.

John was thus spelling out in no uncertain terms the unstoppable event of Jesus' pending death on the cross!

Amen

## **Reflection**

John's version of events is thus totally different from all the other Gospels because of his intention to use Mary to signal to his readers what was about to happen to Jesus. The story is focused on a proclamation of Jesus' death and his burial. No wonder he starts off by mentioning the notation of six days rather than two days as in Matthew (26:2) and Mark (14:1) to reflect his desire to focus the reader's attention on the fact that the stories in this chapter form a unit around the key idea of the death of Jesus with the anointing serving as a symbolic introduction to the Death Story.

Mary anointed Jesus' feet as an act of preparation. Her deed signals the start of the Via Dolorosa, or translated, the road of grieve, pain and

suffering of Jesus. In the other Gospels Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem is the start of his last journey on earth.

In our reading Mary was doing what people normally did with dead bodies by anointing them with strong perfumes. And Mary is doing something that usually only the slaves did. It was not allowed that a pupil or disciple of a Rabbi touch the feet of their master. It was most certainly something not done by woman. And it was frowned upon when an unmarried woman revealed her hair! Double shame!

And John had his own agenda of portraying Judas for what he really was especially in our reading. He was not merely a character without any choice. He was not a victim of circumstance. No, in John's Gospel he is portrayed as someone who made a deliberate choice to gain more money. According to John, Judas was a man full of greed. Judas was not an unfortunate, misguided person. He was inherently an evil thief who had no concern for the poor

It is as if our reading is a copy of unfolding events - Judas the one who would betray him and Mary representing the women who did not have time to anoint His body because He was already resurrected.

Mary being willing to do this act at a meal in the presence of others communicates volumes about her high regard and love for Jesus. It was an anointing fit for a king who came to save the world. Unlike the "sinful" women in Luke's version in the Johannine story, there is no indication of sinfulness, remorse, or kissing and sobbing over his feet.

Our reading is focused on a proclamation of Jesus' death and burial.

Jesus was not advocating neglect of the poor. He was highlighting the importance of the arrival of one of the most significant events in the history of the world—his departure/death.

So what does it mean to us?

I think we can translate Mary's act, as we would say in Scotland, to give Jesus a good send off. She was basically saying goodbye in a sacrificial way that cannot be described in words or measured in money.

I think it is most probably what you and I would do when our loved ones die. We would like to give them something special for just one last time.

And why do we do it? Because we love them and will do anything for them. And more than likely we would also not worry about money.

Mary's act was not only a selfless act but one where she took the time to prepare Jesus for what was to be, HIS sacrifice on the cross. She was preparing HIM for his ultimate death for the sake of others.

So we need to ask ourselves – how do we react on the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross for us?

Our reading this morning helps us to prepare ourselves on how to react. We can react by being more thankful and grateful to God for His ultimate sacrifice. We can show HIM love by LOVING others as we love ourselves. We can show HIM dedication by following HIM – obeying HIM, by the giving of ourselves.

On this morning when we as a congregation look at the past year – of our “successes” – we need to REMEMBER that you and I have NO part in it. It is God who brings us into HIS church, and it is God alone that works in our HEARTS to give all we have to HIM – our redeemer, OUR Heavenly KING. Let us rejoice and glorify God and restrain OURSELVES from patting ourselves on the backs.

I read a story about a boy in America who did not have any money with him in church and who could not put one penny in the collection plate. When he asked his mother what it was all about – she explained that the offering is a deed whereby people give to JESUS what belongs to HIM.

So, after the offering plates were gathered in, the wee boy stood up and walked to the offering plates. By this time everyone held their breaths. On arriving at the offering plates, the boy took one from the communion table, sat it on the carpeted church floor and stepped into the centre of it. As he stood there, he lifted his little head up and said, "Jesus, I don't have anything to give you today, but just me. I give you me!"

This is exactly what Mary did. Let us also give OURSELVES to God in service, gratitude, and love!

Amen