

Lent 4 2022

Mary Anoints Jesus

Jesus is heading towards Jerusalem; it is six days before the Passover and the tension is building. He keeps telling the disciples what is going to happen, but they don't really understand. There is some bickering amongst them. And on their way, they come again to Bethany. The place where Jesus's dear friends Lazarus, Martha and Mary live. The last time they were here, you remember, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. This time they are invited to a meal to honour Jesus. Matthew tells us that it was at the home of Simon the leper. I think we can assume that he is no longer actually a leper, or no-one would have gone near him, let alone had dinner in his house. It is entirely possible that he was healed by Jesus, and this is why he wants to honour Him.

Just to be clear, this account in John appears to be the same as the one in Matthew and Mark but quite different to the one in Luke. Many biblical scholars agree that it is a different incident. And this makes sense, they may not have had Facebook and Tik Tok, but word travelled, the gossip machine in the villages around Jerusalem worked just as well as it does in our villages today. If one person does something and another thinks, what a good idea then they are entirely likely to do the same or something very similar.

This is the third time that we have met Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. The first time they were having a meal at their house and Martha was buzzing around getting everything ready and, I'm sure you remember, complained to Jesus about Mary her sister not pulling her weight. In fact, Mary was sitting at Jesus's feet. Then when their brother Lazarus died. Martha, hearing that Jesus is coming goes out to meet Him. Mary stays at home until Martha comes to tell her that Jesus is asking for her. Then she goes and falls down at His feet.

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Now they are at another meal and Martha, we are told is serving. This sounds like the Martha we know. And where is Mary? At Jesus's feet again, this time as He reclines at the table. Yet again she is breaking the rules of etiquette, but this time she really goes over the top. She decides to take a whole pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume, and pour it over Jesus. This is an extravagant gesture, but not entirely unheard of. To anoint someone with oil or even perfumed oil was something that was sometimes done to honour someone important. The shocking thing was that she let down her hair, something a woman would never have done in mixed company, and then performed this embarrassingly intimate act of wiping Jesus's feet with it. She is honouring her Lord, her King, the one who brought her brother back to life. She doesn't care what anybody thinks of her. Nothing is too good, nothing is too embarrassing, she has to give her very best to Jesus, she has to honour Him in the most extravagant way. It is a picture too of God's extravagant love, He gave us the most precious thing He had – His son, Jesus gave His very self for us.

Just think for a moment where you might be in this picture. Are you just an onlooker, on the edges maybe, wondering who this Jesus can be? Do you have some sympathy with Judas – his motives may have been all wrong but maybe he did have a point about the money being better spent on the poor. It is easy to be critical, isn't it? I think many of us identify with Martha – yet again being the one who does all the work. And there is her sister, yet again doing nothing but drawing attention to herself. Or do you see yourself as Mary, overcome with love and gratitude to Jesus, just wanting to worship Him with everything that you have got, not even thinking about what other people might think. Or maybe like the disciples, believing in Jesus, willing to follow Him, wanting to be obedient to His call but still a bit confused a lot of the time.

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I want to be like Mary. And sometimes I have found myself in that place. I am sometimes like Martha – wanting to be the one worshipping at Jesus’s feet, but just too busy, because there is so much to be done. And like Judas I can be critical of the way others worship and how they spend their money. A lot of the time I am like the disciples, ready and willing to follow Jesus anywhere but a bit confused, if I am honest.

So, what do we take from this? I think that the message is that we have an amazingly extravagant and generous God. We only have to look around us at this time of year to see His hand in the abundance of beauty that is coming to life again everywhere. And in two weeks’ time we will celebrate His ultimate gift of love for us, that Jesus was crucified on the cross, was dead and buried and then rose again to life for us, so that we can experience new life in Him! Our response to Him should also be as loving and generous as we can be. We should want to give Him our best. Not grudgingly, but willingly. Not giving what we think we can spare, of our time and our money. Not putting our own wants and needs first. To serve Him to the very best of our ability, to give our lives to Him, to love others the way that He has loved us. To give generously from all that we have been given, physically, Spiritually, and financially.