

CARING FOR (THE WOUNDS OF) JESUS

Isaiah 43. 16-21

Philippians 3. 4b-14

John 12. 1-8

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Our gospel reading from St John sets us up for the start of Holy Week and for the events that will lead to the arrest, trial, condemnation and death of the Son of God. It is six days before the Passover. Our Lord and his disciples have come to Bethany, a village a few miles east of Jerusalem. Bethany is the home of Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead a few weeks before. Lazarus was a friend of Christ, as were Lazarus's two sisters Martha and Mary. The sisters give a dinner for our Lord, presumably in honour of his wondrous restoration of their brother to life. Lazarus reclines at the table with Jesus.¹

It is at this table that two of Christ's disciples collide. The first is Mary. She breaks open a pound jar of costly perfume made of pure nard. She anoints our Lord's feet with it as he reclines at table, and then she wipes his feet with her hair. The aroma fills the house.

The next is Judas Iscariot. He objects to what Mary does. 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?' A denarius was a day's wage. The ointment cost nearly a year's wages! The Evangelist comments that Judas complained, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; it was he who kept the disciples' common purse and used his office to enrich himself.

¹ If we read both before and after today's gospel reading, we learn that many people came to Bethany not only to see Jesus, but Lazarus; for the fame of Lazarus's return to life had spread far and wide. We also learn that the chief priests consulted together that they might put Lazarus as well as Jesus to death, because so many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus on account of this miracle. St John says the raising of Lazarus from the dead was a leading factor in the size of the crowd greeting Jesus as he entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday (12. 9-11, 17-18).

In response to Judas's outburst, Jesus says, 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.'

Before we consider what is actually happening at this anointing, it is important for us to recognise that in touching Christ's feet during a meal, and in wiping them with her hair, Mary breaks all of the prevailing social and religious rules of etiquette. This is a scandalous, and even intimate gesture. This scene is one that is filled with emotion and human feeling.

But then what was really behind Mary's scandalous gesture? We could say that this anointing symbolised three things.

Firstly, Mary's anointing of our Lord's feet anticipated his burial.² Mary has already heard Jesus speak of what his future would hold; and she acts on his words and comes to prepare him for his final hour. Later on in St John's gospel, we will read that after Christ's death, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus will come to take away his body and will wrap it with a mixture of myrrh and aloes in linen cloths, according to the burial customs of the Jews (19. 38-42). The significance of Mary's act is that it anticipates that final anointing.

Secondly, Mary's anointing and wiping of our Lord's feet point toward Jesus's foot washing at his farewell meal. St John uses special language to narrate Mary's anointing of Christ. The verb he uses for 'wipe' (cf. also Jn 11. 2) is the same verb that is used to describe our Lord's wiping of his disciples' feet at the foot washing in John 13.

² There are two other anointing stories that have been preserved in the Gospels. The first, found in the Gospel of St Mark (14. 3-9) and followed by the Gospel of St Matthew (26. 1-13), is associated with the events of Christ's passion, and narrates the anointing of our Lord's head by a woman as preparation for his burial (Mt 26. 12, Mk 14. 8). The second, found in the Gospel of St Luke (7. 36-49), narrates the anointing of Jesus' feet and has no associations with his burial. This second story highlights the woman's love and respect for Christ (Lk 7. 44-47) and relates his forgiveness of her sins (Lk 7. 48-49).

In the foot washing, Jesus will wash his disciples' feet as an expression of his love for them (cf. Jn 13. 1) and as a way of drawing them into his life with God (13. 8). He will also ask them to repeat this act of service for one another (13. 14-15). What Christ will do and will ask them to do for one another, Mary has already done for our Lord.

The power of the witness of Mary's discipleship in this story is that she knows how to respond to Jesus without even being told. She fulfils Christ's love commandment before he even teaches it (cf. Jn 13. 34-35); and she embraces our Lord's departure at his hour, even before he has taught his disciples about its true meaning (cf. Jn 14. 2-4; 16. 19-24). In the story of the raising of Lazarus in John 11, Mary responded to Jesus's calling (cf. Jn 11. 28-29), thus showing that she was one of Christ's own. In the anointing story in John 12, she shows what it is to be one of our Lord's own. She gives boldly of herself in love to Jesus at his hour, just as he will give boldly of himself in love at his hour.

Thirdly, in her anointing the feet of Christ (and without words), Mary recognises the impending anguish that our Lord will suffer. She prepares those feet that will soon be wounded. For a brief moment, Mary ministers to Jesus, caring for his woundedness before the nails are even driven into his body. And Christ allows her to do this. He accepts this sign of intimate ministry, because he wants to give (us and) Mary a sign. The Son of God longs to be known; he longs to be (figuratively) touched; he longs to be understood.

Henri Nouwen, the Dutch Roman Catholic priest, once taught that we need to care for our own wounds because our wounds are part of who we are. But we also need others to sometimes care for our wounds. He said: 'What does this "caring for my wounds" mean? It means acknowledging them as revelations of my unique way of being human, listening to them as teachers who help me find my way to holiness,

sharing them as a source of consolation and comfort, and allowing others to pour oil on them and bind them in times of great pain' (from an unpublished journal, 'Seeds of Hope', p. 126).

Reclining at that table in the house of Lazarus at Bethany, our Lord allows Mary to care for his (future, but eternal) wounds. And on this Passion Sunday, as you and I begin to accompany Jesus on the way to the cross, we can care for our own woundedness by gazing afresh at his wounds of love. For ultimately, it in Christ's wounds, that our wounds and our woundedness are healed. *This* is the promise of the Cross. To quote the prophet Isaiah: 'But he was wounded for our transgressions...and by his bruises we are healed'.³ *This* is the promise of the Resurrection.

Amen.

³ Cf. Is 53. 5.