

THE ANOINTING 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 today relates the story of our Lord's anointing. The anointing occurs at Bethany, less than two miles from Jerusalem, where (according to the previous chapter of St John's Gospel) Jesus is reported as having raised Lazarus from the dead. That miracle has caused great concern amongst the chief priests and the Pharisees; and they, with other members of the Sanhedrin, agree that Christ must be killed. Our Lord now finds himself under a death sentence; and he leaves Bethany in order to withdraw to a village called Ephraim, in a region near the desert. But given that Passover is approaching, Jesus has now returned to Bethany. The fact that this anointing occurs on the sixth day before the Passover¹ reminds us that Christ's final hour is not long in coming.

There, in Bethany, a dinner is given in our Lord's honour. St John does not specify who gave the dinner for Jesus; but since Martha, Lazarus and Mary are mentioned as being present at that the dinner, we may assume that the dinner is at the home of this family whom Jesus loves.

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

¹ Six days before the Passover is the 8th day of Nisan. In Leviticus 9, on the 8th day of Nisan Aaron was anointed and began his role as the first High Priest. He was anointed with oil made from 'myrrh, cinnamon, cane, cassia and olive oil' (cf. Ex 30. 22). His head was anointed, although some Jewish literature indicates that his hands and feet were anointed as well, coupled with the anointing of blood and washing with water.

On the 8th day of Nisan, like Aaron the High Priest, Jesus is anointed on his feet with oil. Mary uses 'spikenard' to anoint Jesus' feet. Spikenard is made from cinnamon, myrrh, fine spices and olive oil. It is the identical substance of the anointing oil for the High Priest.

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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).

The anointing story in St John's gospel is different to the other anointing stories given in the Synoptic Gospels: it does not happen in the house of Simon the Leper or in the house of a Pharisee; and our Lord is not anointed by an unidentified woman or by a sinful woman (prostitute). This time, in the house of Lazarus, Jesus is anointed by Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus (Jn 11. 1-2). Mary is Christ's friend. She has already heard him speak about what his future would hold; and she acts on his words and comes to prepare him for his final hour.

The anointing itself is related in verse 3 of John 12.² Not unlike the other anointing stories, that of St John's Gospel speaks of the quality of the perfume used; but it also mentions the quantity – a pint of pure nard. And while the anointing story in St Luke's Gospel mentions that the sinful woman wiped her tears from our Lord's feet with her hair, St John uses special language to narrate Mary's anointing of Jesus. The verb he uses for 'wipe' (cf. also Jn 11. 2) is the same verb used to describe Christ's wiping of his disciples' feet at the foot washing in John 13. Mary's anointing and

² The anointing at Bethany might simply have been an honour given to a special guest at a pre-Passover gathering. The connection with Passover may, however, have more to do with the symbolism of a sacrificed lamb at Passover. Many of the animal sacrifices in the Hebrew Bible are accompanied by oil (cf. Ex 29. 38-42; Lev 14. 12-13).

On the other hand, this anointing at Bethany may have anticipated Jesus' coming as King. Kings were anointed when they began their roles. One particularly important example is that of Solomon, who was anointed 'prince of the people' by Zadok in 1 Chron 29. 22. Jesus will soon be mocked as King (Mk 15. 2, 12) and even crowned with thorns and given a royal robe (Mk 15. 1—20). The sign above the cross will designate Jesus as the 'King of the Jews' (Mk 15. 26).

Ultimately, however, the anointing by Mary anticipates Jesus' death and burial.

wiping of our Lord's feet therefore point toward Jesus' foot washing at his farewell meal.

The reference to the pervasiveness of the fragrance of the perfume signals the extravagance of Mary's act: a pint of perfume would, indeed, overwhelm the whole house. Yet this reference to the perfume's fragrance may have additional significance. In the previous chapter of St John's Gospel, Martha attempted to stop Christ at Lazarus' tomb because of the stench that would come out of the tomb. Through Mary's act, the stench of death that once lingered over this household has been replaced by the fragrance of love and devotion.

In the anointing story given in the Gospel of St Mark, an unnamed group protests against the woman's waste of the perfume (14. 5); but in St John's account, this protest is voiced by Judas alone. The major role played by Judas in St John's anointing story suggests that the Fourth Evangelist wants to establish a link between Mary's anointing and the last Passover meal (Jn 13. 2, 26, 29). The lengthy description of Judas in verse 4 serves two purposes. Firstly, it makes the connection with our Lord's death explicit (cf. also Jn 6. 71; 18. 2, 5); and secondly, it takes away the legitimacy of Judas' protest before he even speaks. What might be a reasonable complaint about the expenditure of money is shown to be untrustworthy, thanks to St John's commentary. Judas' words in verse 5 nonetheless underscore the extravagance of Mary's act; she has spent a year's wages on this act of devotion.³ Verses 3 to 6 therefore narrate two distinct responses to the arrival of Jesus' hour. Mary is the model of faithful discipleship, and Judas is the model of unfaithful discipleship.

³ Given that the family of Lazarus possessed a family burial vault (cf. Jn 11. 38) and that a large number of Jews came from Jerusalem to console the family on the death of Lazarus (Jn 11. 39), it may be assumed that this family at Bethany belonged to the wealthier class of the people. This would help explain how Mary of Bethany could afford to possess quantities of expensive perfume.

In St Mark's Gospel, the anointing story tells of the only anointing that Christ's body receives for its burial. In St John's Gospel, however, there will be yet another anointing at the time of our Lord's burial (19. 38-42). The significance of Mary's act is that it anticipates that final anointing. Jesus' words in verse 7 ('she bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial') interpret Mary's act as confirming the impending arrival of his hour. And when he says, 'You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me' – a quote from Deuteronomy (15. 11) – it reminds the disciples of the limited time of Christ's presence among them, and the urgency to respond to Jesus while he is still there (cf. Jn 11. 9-10). Mary recognised this limitedness, and responded to it.

As we consider the implications of this anointing story, I invite you to look with me at a rendering of *Christ in the house of Mary and Martha*, by Johannes Vermeer, one of the greatest painters of the 17th-century Dutch Golden Age. You will find a copy of this painting in your weekly bulletin. In this painting, Mary is not portrayed as anointing the feet of our Lord; rather, she is sitting at his feet, just as a disciple would sit at the feet of his or her teacher (cf. Lk 10. 38-41).

We have seen that Mary's anointing of Jesus anticipates two events in Christ's hour: the washing of his disciples' feet at the last supper, and our Lord's burial. Perhaps because the linkage with Jesus' burial is an interpretation shared by the Gospels of St Mark and St Matthew, many commentators have focused almost exclusively on this aspect of the story.

Yet it is in the link between the anointing and the *foot washing* that St John's distinctive theology can be seen most clearly. The full meaning of this story is lost when that linkage is overlooked.

In the foot washing, Christ will wash his disciples' feet as an expression of his love for them (cf. Jn 13. 1), 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 our Lord will do and will ask them to do for one another, Mary has already done for Jesus. In Mary, then, we readers are given the picture of the fulness of the life of discipleship. Mary's act shows forth the love that will be the hallmark of discipleship in St John's Gospel and the recognition of Christ's identity that is the decisive mark of the Christian life.

Mary's act of discipleship is brought out even more strongly in the contrast with Judas in this scene. Judas does not respond to the importance of our Lord's hour with an act of love for him, but rather with self-centred disdain. Judas' response will ultimately lead to the betrayal of Jesus' flock,⁴ whereas Mary's actions model the life of love that should characterise Christ's sheep.

The power of the witness of Mary's discipleship in this story is that she knows how to respond to our Lord without even being told. She fulfils Jesus' love commandment before he even teaches it (cf. Jn 13. 34-35); and she embraces Christ'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 our Lord's calling for her (cf. Jn 11. 28-29), thus showing that she was one of Jesus' own. In the anointing story in John 12, she shows what it is to *be* one of Christ's own. She gives boldly of *herself* in love to our Lord at his hour, just as Jesus will give boldly of *himself* in love at his hour.

In Mary's anointing of our Lord, faithful discipleship is fully revealed. Discipleship is defined by acts of love and one's response to Jesus. Amen.

⁴ In this passage, Judas is labelled as a 'thief', the same word used to describe one who threatens the flock in Jn 10. 1, 8, 10. When Judas will betray Jesus, he will also betray Jesus' sheep.