

A HOMILY FOR HOLY MONDAY: A CUP OF BLESSING

John 12. 1-11

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

Today's gospel serves as a lovely prelude to the Passion of our Lord. Jesus is back in the house of his friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus, recently brought back from the dead. Perhaps these are his last moments of companionship before the horrors that are to come. Christ is there with all of his other disciples.

We note with interest that the home of Lazarus is in *Bethany*. There, in Bethany, a meal is offered; and (as we shall see) more than one 'cup of blessing' is shared. True to character, Martha is the active hostess. And Mary, the contemplative one, brings in a jar of an expensive perfumed unguent and pours it all over the feet of our Lord, filling the house with its fragrance.

Perhaps you remember that at the beginning of John's gospel, John the Baptist witnessed and baptised (we are told) in Bethany (1. 28). There in Bethany, John 'came as a witness to testify to the light' (1. 8). He told the crowds, 'Among you stands One whom you do not know (whom you do not recognise), the One who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal' (1. 26-27). John witnessed to the light, but even John was not worthy to untie Jesus's sandal. But now, again in Bethany (the evangelist is careful to point this out), a woman is worthy to do even more than just untie Christ's sandal: she is permitted to anoint his feet with perfume. The house is filled with its fragrance. The house of Lazarus, Mary

and Martha becomes, as it were, a chapel; and the hearts of those present (and that figuratively includes us) are filled with the luscious fragrance of this witness of Mary.¹

When we think about this gospel passage, we often tend to focus on what Mary does and how much it cost her; or we reflect upon Judas's judgemental reaction. But in this story we actually see what our Lord does *for Mary*. Jesus's love turns Mary into a witness. Christ lifts her up, even above all the others, as high as John the Baptist, if not higher! This really should not surprise us. We know that our Lord constantly lifted up the lowly, the outcast, the ostracised and the poor... for theirs is the kingdom of God. And now, suddenly, Mary is a preacher: Mary, the least in her world, is now the first of the disciples. Mary preaches; she testifies to the light of the One among us, at this table, whom we do not recognise.

In Mary's act, in this perfume that fills us with its fragrance, in this cup of blessing, in this preaching, in this light, we see *Light*. In the simple witness of Mary – the insignificant and apparently wasteful act of anointing feet with perfume – the judgement of the world is undone. Judas is silenced. Our agendas are silenced. And we are directed towards Jesus and the poor who are always with us.

'Leave her alone', Christ says. In these words of judgement and grace, our Lord reveals to us the secret of God's judgement itself. The bruised reed will not be broken, and the dimly burning wick will not be quenched.² Mercy unties the judgement of Judas. Mercy undoes the judgement of the world. Mercy opens the way to life.

Amen.

¹ This account is probably the same as that described in Mark 14 (verses 3-9) and Matthew 26 (verses 6-13) but is distinct from the story of the woman in Luke (7. 36-50).

² Cf. Is 42. 3.