

## **Notes for Podcast Holy Week Monday – The Anointing**

John 12: 1 - 8

Both Matthew and Mark include in their Gospels stories that parallel the one recorded in the Gospel of John and for all of the stories there is a close connection with the imminent suffering and death of Jesus. The Matthew and Mark stories place Jesus at Bethany in the house of someone called Simon, who it seems had suffered from a 'dreaded skin disease'.

The story *from John's* Gospel pays special attention to placing the anointing of Jesus between the raising of Lazarus and the death of Jesus and begins by making a specific link with the resurrection of Lazarus.

The story takes place in "Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead" and there is reference also to the fact that the sisters Mary and Martha are present.

The stories in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark don't identify the woman who anoints Jesus and the subsequent accusations against her of wasteful behaviour are not specifically from Judas but from 'the disciples' (Matthew) or 'some of the people (Mark).

In the 'John' account, the extravagance of Mary's action with the expensive Nard gives a clear indication of her response to the restoration to life of her brother Lazarus. *"She took half a litre of very expensive perfume made of pure nard, poured it on Jesus' feet and then wiped them with her hair"*

Even before the critical remarks of Judas about the value of the perfume, people of that time reading the account would know the high value of such a large quantity of this perfume. We are told that its perfume filled the entire house.

But what readers of that time might find a bit odd about this story is that Mary anoints the FEET of Jesus rather than his HEAD, as in the case of Mark 14:3 and Matthew 26:7. She then wipes his feet with her hair, which effectively removes a great deal of what she has just extravagantly poured onto his feet!

There are two possibilities in trying to understand this gesture by Mary. Firstly, in John 13:1-20, Jesus washes the feet of his disciples, dries them and then tells them that they are to do the same thing for each other. Mary's action of anointing the feet of Jesus and wiping them with her hair may be a symbolic anticipation of this service that Jesus teaches his disciples.

Secondly, anointing the feet may also anticipate the anointing for burial that to which Jesus refers in verse 7 of the John passage.

Judas' response, of course, addresses the money involved rather than what was anointed. In the parallel stories to this one in the Gospel of John, the value of the ointment seems to be just about understanding financial priorities and material significance. But in this account, we are invited to ask ourselves a question about the sinister motives of Judas. If the perfume had been sold, Judas was the one in the most favourable position to benefit from any money that may have been acquired.

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The writer elsewhere explains that Judas' betrayal of Jesus happens as a result of the devil's intervention and so this response by Judas seems to support that claim (see 6:70-71 and 13:2,27).

Jesus' response is interesting. He defends Mary's actions and then dismisses Judas' 'fake' response about being concerned for the poor.

His comment that Mary bought the perfume "*so that she might keep it for the day of my burial*" is a bit mysterious and possibly even confusing. If Mary had consciously intended to use it for the purpose that Jesus says, surely she is unlikely to have used it at this dinner?

Probably Jesus is referring to the future actions of Mary (of which she wouldn't be aware) rather than to this specific perfume. The day of his burial is of course now very close.

Jesus says: "*You will always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.*" If you take this statement out of context – and that is something that people frequently do – it seems a bit callous in its content.

But "You always have the poor" is not a statement about the social attitudes that ought to affect the behaviour of the church. Instead, it contrasts the presence of the poor with the imminent absence of Jesus. He is just reminding them that he will not be with them for much longer.

Judas appears (on the surface) to speak for the poor. You could even make the assumption from his words that he is also expressing his concern for all people who are outcasts, rejected and on the edge of society. But Mary, by contrast, seems at first to be engaging in wasteful and negligent behaviour, throwing expensive perfume around as if the cost is unimportant and she doesn't care that its value could feed a lot of people.

But it is actually Mary who is the REAL PROPHET in this story. She is the one who knows what the hour is, how short time is and how much Jesus needs to be valued above all the superficial and materialistic obsessions of human beings.

As we continue our journey through this Holy Week, may we reflect on the great value, the eternal value of the great gift of God to humankind through Jesus Christ. AMEN.