

The Gift that marks the turning point



My other half asked me: What is 'Passion Sunday?' Has Phil made a mistake on the service sheet, should it read 'Palm Sunday'? Today is the Fifth Sunday of Lent, the one before Palm Sunday and is traditionally called Passion Sunday. It still is in some RC Catholic Churches and some Anglican churches as well as in traditional Methodism. It was (or is) the start of the season of 'Passiontide' when crosses were covered up until Easter Sunday. This can all seem rather strange nowadays when we tend to focus on the rejoicing by the crowd welcoming Jesus into Jerusalem celebrated on Palm Sunday (which is next week). The language is strange too. Passion is a word used to describe many things but has lost its older use and meaning which is all about suffering. The word 'Passion' is used to describe the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus. So why have we just listened to the account of Mary at Bethany anointing Jesus?

The whole of chapter 11 is about the raising of Lazarus from the dead and John's Gospel tells us that this act of Jesus 'ups the stakes'- the chief priests and the Pharisees call a meeting and begin to plot how to put an end to the Jesus problem: they let it be known that anyone who knows the location of Jesus needs to inform them. So Jesus stops moving about publicly among the Jews and withdraws to a region near the desert. This a lull before the events of his final week of ministry.

Six days before Passover, Jesus goes back to where Lazarus lives. (Back to Bethany, the place of the event that causes the Pharisees and Chief priests to unite against him!) It is then the 24hrs observance of Shabbat- the Jewish Sabbath. And it's at the Saturday meal that ends shabbat that Mary, a sister of Lazarus, anoints Jesus.

The meal has begun- Martha, Mary's sister is serving. They are 'at table' but this a low table and people are reclining. The people eating at the table are male. Mary interrupts the proceedings; her actions draw everybody's attention. She is in full sight of all the company. She uses pure nard- very expensive oil and generously anoints his feet- (and/ or his head in other Gospels). The aroma fills the house and is all pervading – it is breathed in by all and takes their senses by surprise. Mary kneels on the floor and in dealing with the feet is taking the position of a servant. She dries Jesus' feet by wiping them with her hair. (Women wore their hair up and in general covered, with only their husbands seeing their long hair.) So presumably the men watch as Mary lets down her long hair and then uses it to dry his feet- possibly lifting his feet to do this. This is an intimate act which transgresses all the expected rules of Mary's religion and culture; and the subject of anointing is Jesus- rabbi, master, lord.

What is surprising, is not that Judas objects, but that he appears to be the only one. Do the disciples, feel the threat, see that the character of their time together is changing? Maybe they get the connection between Mary's act and burial..... Anyhow, immediately Jesus defends Mary saying: "She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.' Surely these words must have made them stop and think.

In John's Gospel Judas' intervention does not initiate a discussion around poverty versus giving money to show reverence and worship; his objection is not allowed to deflect from the centrality of Mary's devotion. Here, the point is that Judas doesn't really see what is happening and it is a foreshadowing of Judas' betrayal of Jesus.

Whereas Mary embraces the whole of what Jesus is about- Mary is the one who is able to express the reality of their situation. Mary is the one who is courageous enough to address 'the elephant in the room' - the fact that Jesus's ministry is coming to an end- the others don't want to believe this. Mary has grasped that the raising of Lazarus will mean that the people will see Jesus as their hope and the authorities will see Jesus as a threat to their leadership. She sees that Jesus' death has become inevitable so, acknowledging the smell of fear and death that seems to be in the air, she pours the oil used for embalming the dead over his body to treasure his precious presence amongst them, to show her faith in all that he is and about to do. Mary gives this gift which is worth a year's payment of the average working wage even though she understands that he will die and even because of it. It is an amazing act of devotion, full of love and hope, and with enough understanding for the present.

The raising of Lazarus points to the resurrection of Jesus but first, there will be, death on a cross. This gift of pure nard ritually marks the turning point of no return. From now on,

in our remembering of Jesus' life on earth, we look forward to the suffering and death – to the Passion of Jesus Christ.

We do so with Mary as a model for our devotion. She sees beyond religious and cultural barriers; bypasses the limitations of her role in life, faces doubts concerning the future and overcomes worries about what other people think and... simply gives of herself in the moment. Here I am. This is what I have. I am yours and what I have is at your service. Whatever happens, my hope is in you..... This gift is a mark that as you turn to the cross, I turn to you.

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