

Monday of Holy Week 2020

John 12:1-11

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ²There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' ⁶(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) ⁷Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'

⁹ When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ¹⁰So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, ¹¹since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.

[NRSV]

Affection and loyalty come in many different forms. Worship manifests itself in diverse styles and manners – some effusive and outgoing, some practical and down to earth. Our Gospel scene lays out before us a spectrum of responses we might find in any gathering of people – what we might find in us.

First we see Lazarus – a man who has just been through an extraordinary experience. He is Jesus' friend, and we know how much he meant to him. In the previous chapter, John tells us that Lazarus died, and when Jesus eventually came, he wept at the entrance to the tomb where he had been buried. Despite the hopelessness, the emotions and the terrible smell of decay, Jesus restores his friend to life. And now, having had a little time to recover, in return Lazarus offers hospitality a few days before the Passover feast – the greatest party in the Jewish year. We might think that it was the least he could do, and in his culture it would have been expected, but this is not just a token gesture. All of Jesus' followers were welcomed and accommodated and fed, which was no small thing, and yet for Lazarus it expressed his friendship and loyalty.

Of course the hospitality isn't just Lazarus's to give, although he pays the bills. His sister Martha, ever the practical one, has made a meal. She was the one, when Lazarus died, who had told Jesus that he was late and that he could still do something about it. She liked action. She is always busy in the kitchen - sometimes too busy, as Jesus once observed. It's true that on some occasions the busyness was an escape, an excuse to keep out of the way and avoid getting too involved. It was a useful distraction from things she didn't want to think about. But today, for her, it was important that other people had the chance to share time, conversation and food without worrying about where it's coming from. She prepares, she cooks, she clears away without complaining, and without really being noticed by most who are there. For her, these simple acts of practical service are her expressions of love. Today she's serving Jesus, and her brother and the others there, but she's listening, eavesdropping, taking it in.

And we are also told that the disciples are all there. They are a funny lot. Some of them seem pretty rough - especially the fishermen. Some have clearly had a little more education,

especially the one who used to be a tax-collector. And then there were one or two who were difficult to get near. Judas was an enigma. He was always around, but was restless, edgy, frustrated, impatient for something. It was just hard to know exactly what. On occasions it was even hard to know why he was there at all, but something continued to draw him to Jesus.

And then in the midst of it all there is Mary. She's the one sitting at Jesus' feet. It was a familiar place for her. She had been sitting at his feet learning, when her sister had reproached her for not helping. She had knelt at Jesus' feet to plead with him to save her brother. She was always more emotional and demonstrative than sensible, practical Martha, so people expect her to be a bit more showy. But this time she still manages to shock everyone with what she does. In her hand is the most precious thing she owns – a jar of nard – the perfume of the lovers in the Song of Songs. She has kept this safe for all of her life, ready for the most special of occasions. As she cracks it open, the room is overwhelmed with the extravagance of the perfume. As she puts it on Jesus' feet, it seems to permeate every place it can find, however tiny and compact. Nothing can escape its blessing. For Mary her gift is pure worship – her most precious possession given to the person most precious to her. And she shocks the room with the intimacy of letting down her hair to wipe Jesus' feet.

But not everyone wants the blessing. Not everyone shares her devotion. Not everyone understands that love expresses itself in illogical, disproportionate, and even outrageous ways. Judas looks on, disapproving, making excuses, failing to comprehend that love's gifts don't work by a set of accounts or the weighing out of gold or silver. Instead he complains about the extravagance, to divert from his own holding back. He points to the needs of the poor, when he's been more concerned about his own needs, and although he's intrigued and connected to Jesus, he doesn't really understand what he's up to. He just doesn't get it. And because he doesn't get it, he's annoyed by those who do, and he's annoyed by how they express it.

I wonder whose eyes we have as we imagine this scene:

Is it practical Martha?

Is it hospitable Lazarus?

Is it disapproving Judas?

Or is it emotional Mary.

We've probably felt something in common with each of them as we pictured the scene. Perhaps today we can find a little time and space to reflect on how we bring our worship to Jesus, and also to reflect on the fears, the misgivings, and the inhibitions that hold us back.