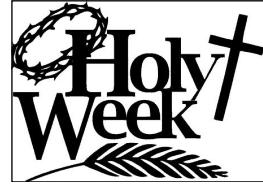


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Holy Monday 2018

Mary and Martha

John 12:1-11

'Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard , anointed Jesus feet and wiped them with her hair.'

Lazarus, Martha, and Mary, a brother and two sisters who are hosting Jesus at their house six days before the Passover. We know this family. In the gospel of Luke, we hear that Jesus went to Martha's house, and Martha was distracted by the tasks involved in preparing the food and caring for her guest. Mary sits and listens to Jesus, and Martha tries to get Jesus to tell her off for not helping. Jesus answers with the famous words 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by so many things, there is the need for only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part which will not be taken away from her'.

I know from many conversations I have had with people during Bible studies around this text, that many of us secretly think we would have been more likely to be Martha than Mary in that story. That if Jesus came to our house for dinner, it would have been very difficult to sit at Jesus feet listening knowing that there was a table to be laid and dinner to be cooked. It would have been difficult to sit and listen with the smell of burning dinner seeping under the kitchen door.

It is good then, that in John chapter 11, very shortly before the passage set for today begins, we get another angle on Martha. Her brother has died, in fact, he has been dead for four days, and Jesus has arrived. Martha says to Jesus 'Even now, I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him... I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world'. Martha is a woman of deep faith. I suspect she is also someone whose faith is expressed by doing. If Martha were in one of our churches today, she would perhaps have been the PCC secretary, the Sunday school teacher, the person in charge of the kitchen. She would perhaps have had a handle on the rotas, been the one who stepped in at the last minute to fill the gaps. Perhaps, because she was seen as the practical one, no one would have known how deep her faith was, and it was out of that faith that she did all these things.

And Jesus accepts Martha. Accepts all the things she wants to do for him, and also makes it clear to her that others express their faith in different ways. That those not rushing about are also people of faith, and the faith expressed in their stillness will not be taken away from them.

Which brings us to the gospel reading set for today. Mary, Martha, and Lazarus are having a dinner for Jesus. It is six days before the Passover, and Jesus must have been able to feel its coming creeping down the back of his neck. The Passover meal, Judas' betrayal, the trial before Pilate. His earthly life is about to come to an abrupt and painful end. I wonder whether that is one of the things which drew him to the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. They are his friends, he is comfortable with them. For Jesus, who was always at the homes of others, this would have been one of the places he felt at home. Safe with his friends, at least for the moment, the calm before the storm.



And then Mary does this extraordinary thing, she anoints Jesus' feet and wipes them with her hair. It is extraordinary on several levels. First, whilst it would have been quite normal to anoint the head of a visitor, it would have been unusual to anoint his feet. Even more unusual, to the point of being shocking, she wipes them with her hair. In our culture, that would be an extraordinary thing to do. In Mary's culture, even more so. It would have been considered immodest even to loosen her hair from its fastening. To then wipe a man's feet with it would have been deeply shocking. And the smell of the nard would have permeated the room and of course permeated Mary, because it was all over her hair. We can imagine Judas, and probably most other people in the room not knowing where to start in describing how wrong this was. Judas fixes on the financial aspect, perhaps because it is the least embarrassing to talk about. On top of everything else, Mary has spent an astronomical sum of money on this act of worship.

And so, the cost to Mary of doing this would have been considerable. The cost to her reputation, losing her hair and wiping Jesus feet, and the cost to her financially in the perfume which she has used.

And again, like in the gospel of Luke, Jesus speaks for Mary 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she may have it for the day of my burial.'

Mary is very good at worship, and other people do not value her because they do not think what she is doing is important. Martha puts a greater value on preparing the meal. Judas is concerned about the money. And this is one of the many moments in the gospels which we can understand immediately here in Lancaster Priory in 2018 with no cultural explanation, because that is hard for us too. Worship does not pay the bills, it does not cook the dinner or wash the dishes. It has no survival value. What it does is add value to survival. When Mary poured out that perfume, she poured out her love for her saviour and her sorrow at his coming death. She loved wastefully and expensively just as Jesus was to love her, and us on his long road to the cross.

And so, as we stand at the doorway of Holy Week, we are greeted by these two very different sisters, Mary and Martha. Martha shows her faith through all the practical things she does. Mary shows her faith through her acts of worship. They are both important, both loved by God and valuable members of the community of faith. And so it is with us. We are all different and we offer that difference to God, the different ways we worship. The different ways we serve. As we set our faces towards Jerusalem to walk the way of the cross with Christ, we take with us all that we are, and all that we have to offer in worship and in service. **Amen**