

## **Address by Bill Pattinson for Passion Sunday 2022**

### **Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus, Anoints Jesus' Feet**

As I get older, small acts can be very pleasurable. For example, every six weeks Avril and I visit our chiropodist, or should I use the more internationally recognised term, podiatrist? Always get confused with that and pediatriist, whom I certainly don't visit. Anyway, we have our feet done, and we leave with a new spring in our step. The final part of this procedure, when oil is rubbed on your feet, is especially enjoyable.

Today, the fifth Sunday of Lent, just two weeks before Easter Day, the Lectionary informs us that Passiontide begins. And it begins with the Gospel story of Mary of Bethany anointing the feet of Jesus "with a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard" before wiping them with her hair. I'm sure that this flagrant, yet fragrant, act gave Jesus much pleasure. But what has it to do with Jesus' passion? As we are informed that this act occurred "six days before the Passover" we are in the final week of Jesus' life. Indeed this same reading is always set for the Monday of Holy Week. Feet play a significant part during Christ's final days. Apart from this episode, just prior to their final meal together, Jesus washes the disciples' feet, before telling them they should wash each others' feet. Jesus' feet are then pierced, nailed to a cross, as he is cruelly crucified on Golgotha just outside Jerusalem, just four days after Mary had anointed them. And Jesus defends Mary's act of extravagant holiness saying, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial." Nard, or spikenard to give it its full name, was sweet smelling and not dissimilar to honeysuckle, and was used to anoint the dead. This excessive, costly and unrestrained act forms the perfect bridge to Holy Week and beyond. Passiontide begins.

I'd like to suggest that this beautiful, intimate story reflects our own life stories of faith, concentrating, as it does, on love, death and resurrection. The story is set in Bethany, just two miles from Jerusalem. It's a perfect place for Jesus to stay before setting off on the trials and tribulations of his final week. He is in the home of Lazarus, whom Jesus had recently raised from the dead. This event had caused quite a stir, arousing great interest and excitement among the local residents, but despair and anger among the Chief Priests of the Temple, who were now plotting to not only kill Jesus, but also Lazarus. Quite understandably, Lazarus, along with his two sisters, was celebrating his resurrection from the dead, entertaining his Lord and wonderful life-giver, Jesus, with a sumptuous meal. Jesus knows the house well. We hear of

three visits in the Gospels. One in Luke where Martha is busy with all the preparations for their special visitor, while Mary sits at Jesus' feet, listening to what he has to say. The other two occasions are recounted in John. Firstly, when Lazarus is raised from the dead, where Mary is again kneeling at Jesus' feet, weeping and saying to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Secondly on this occasion of the celebratory resurrection feast, when for a third time we see Mary at Jesus' feet, wiping them after she had anointed them with costly perfume.

Andrea Skevington in her third poem entitled "Mary at your feet" writes:

"She kneels at your feet again,  
pours out extravagant nard,  
scandalous anointing of your warm, living feet,  
unbinds her hair and let's it flow like water  
over them, wiping them with such reckless  
and tender thanksgiving."

Well, there are times when we all want to let our hair down, dance in the rain, get a little wild. After all life is too short not to colour outside the lines every once in a while. Well Mary would certainly have caused a few jaws to drop by behaving so shamelessly. There were only two occasions in those days when women would let down their hair - one during a sexual act of intimacy, the other when in mourning. Jesus, you notice, quickly defends Mary by making reference to his burial. It's almost as though Mary knows Jesus is about to die. Mary was willing to humiliate herself with her body for the sake of bringing glory to God. This is an out pouring of gratitude, a beautiful, humble act of love. This is the love Jesus wants us to give to him - to love him as he loves us. To worship him, to honour him, to make him the centre of our lives, as Mary did. And notice, as Mary wipes Jesus' feet with her hair, it's as if she is anointing herself. The oil that she offered Jesus is now on her head. If we give ourselves to Jesus with no holding back, then we ourselves will be blessed.

Of course, there's always the party pooper. Often a man concerned about the financial cost of things. Enter Judas. In the middle of all the celebrations, the feasting and Mary's amazing act of love, Judas has to complain. "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor? Now this shows how expensive this perfume which Mary poured onto Jesus' feet really was. Three

hundred denarii represents a year's wages at that time - that's a lot of money. Judas' criticism has indeed an economic and charitable logic. He would have heard many times Jesus making reference to loving those who were disadvantaged, those who were poor. But this criticism by Judas also resembles a rigorous unyielding piety that cannot stand a wild act of love like Mary's.

Yet, despite all the loving and celebrating, death is in the air. Quite literally as the smell of nard, used to anoint corpses, was the smell of death. Had Mary let down her hair as an act of mourning? Was she anointing Jesus in preparation for his burial in a few days time? Was she revealing to all present that here was the Messiah, which means the anointed one, the one who is to come? Death in life is a constant companion and we have to prepare for it. But this feast is also about resurrection from the dead. Lazarus was dead, but is alive again. This resurrection feast foreshadows all those banquet feasts - banquets with long tables, set wide with good things, with room enough for all to be welcome in God's kingdom. Shall we not also celebrate our Lord's resurrection in two week's time - our Easter feast? And we have the promise of resurrection ourselves. Yet more celebrating because life in the name of Jesus has overcome death. What resurrection joy! Love, death and resurrection. What are your thoughts?

As Malcolm Guite writes in his poem "The Anointing at Bethany":

"The whole room fills to feast the senses  
With all the yearning such a fragrance brings  
The heart is mourning, but the spirit dances,  
Here at the very centre of all things,  
Here at the meeting place of love and loss  
We all foresee, and see beyond the cross."