

**Monday in Holy Week**

**St. Peter's, Petersfield**

**10<sup>th</sup> April 2017**

**Compline**

**Reading: John 12: 1-8**

Over these next three nights I want us to look and reflect upon three of the characters who in quite different ways play a significant part in the final days of Jesus' life. Tomorrow we shall consider Judas Iscariot and on Wednesday Peter, but tonight it is to be Mary of Bethany. Try to imagine yourself at this dinner party which Martha, Mary and Lazarus gave for Jesus and his disciples. Would you want to be with Martha, busy and practical as ever, helping to get the meal ready? Would you be next to Judas Iscariot, who you can sense has a brooding and barely suppressed sense of frustration at the way matters seem to have gone over these last few days? Would you be alongside Mary, who seems to have a particular devotion to (dare I say a crush on?) Jesus, and is always portrayed kneeling or sitting at Jesus' feet as an avid disciple? It's six days before Passover, so by John's reckoning it is Saturday evening, just hours before the momentous events of what we call Palm Sunday. The Sabbath is over at sundown and the new week is beginning with this gathering of friends for a meal. Is there a sense of anticipation or foreboding of what is to come? What are people talking about?

Lazarus reclines at table with Jesus; the conversation between the one whom Jesus had recently called out from the tomb and the one on his way to his own tomb must have been interesting! Then something extraordinary happens. Mary brings out a large jar of perfumed oil and pours the lot over Jesus' feet and begins to wipe his feet with her hair. It's so embarrassing, it's outrageous, it's extravagant to the point of recklessness. It's ... Mary! And she doesn't

pour it on Jesus' head, where it might be seen as a symbolic act of messianic coronation anointing, but on his feet, the place where the preparation of a corpse for burial would start. Jewish women usually kept their hair tied up in public, and only let it loose when undressing, for a husband, or as a sign of distraction in mourning. Mary would have had her hair loose when she fell at Jesus's feet in grief after the death of Lazarus; now she does so again, in unabashed love for Jesus – but the hints of burial and grief are impossible to ignore.

And the smell! *“The house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment”*. Our sense of smell is both highly sensitive and evocative. I remember as my mother lay dying, my sister had managed to find a bunch of lily-of-the-valley, my mother's favourite flower, and held it under her nose and a lovely smile spread across her face as she recognised the scent. I bet it was the all-pervading smell of this *“pure oil of nard”* that triggered Judas' reaction, from which we learn just how expensive this perfumed oil was and also the very mixed motives from which Judas spoke. Judas Iscariot is a very negative figure in John's gospel, which never has a good word to say of him. He is always referred to as the betrayer, the thief, the hypocrite, the man of darkness. But more of him tomorrow. Now it seems this incident acted as a catalyst for Judas, provoking an outburst that not only misunderstood the gesture of Mary (probably implying the worst possible motives to Mary's provocative act), but also convincing him that this was not the way he wanted to see Jesus as Messiah.

I suppose Mary's gesture was a supreme example of “splash giving”. She gave in this dramatic gesture the most expensive thing she possessed to Jesus. It was a symbol of herself, of her devotion to him. For John, our gospel writer, it became a symbol of how God deals with us, an anticipation God's outpouring

of love in Christ: *“God so loved the world that he gave...”* Mary of Bethany becomes the model of Christian response to an all-giving, all-loving God. She gave without reckoning to God, and her generous act filled the house with its fragrance. Many early Christian writers were quick to seize upon the symbolism here, that the house somehow represented the church, the faithful community, and her one sacrificial act has a benefit and blessing for all.

What may we have to offer our loving God as we accompany Jesus through the last week of his life? If not something material, then what about offering our messy, mixed-motive lives to God as a sign of our love? We will find that not only is that acceptable but because of God’s great love for us, we will find ourselves welcomed, reconciled, and sitting at table with the one who has known us and loved us since before we were born.