

The Fifth Sunday of Lent

Principal Service readings

Isaiah 43.16-21	God is doing something new: a road in the desert ...
Psalms 126	Song of the returning exiles
Philippians 3.4b-14	The true way of salvation (through faith)
John 12.1-8	The anointing at Bethany

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,
speak to our hearts in the stillness,
keep us steadfast in the foundation that cannot be shaken,
lift up our eyes to behold the vision of your glory;
and perfect our faith, now and always. Amen.

Society of Saint Francis

Gospel Reading

The Anointing at Bethany

¹Six 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.'

John 12.1-8 NRSV¹

Comments and Questions

In this year C of the lectionary Luke has been the principal source for the gospel readings, but this reading is taken from John's (only Luke among the evangelists does not include it).

John is beginning his account of the final week leading up to the crucifixion, and places the anointing by Mary the day before Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. John's introduction, 'Six days before the Passover,' indicates that this incident is connected with Jesus' last Passover.

The Passover was attended by perhaps 100,000 pilgrims every year. The purifications could start a week before (see Exodus 19.10 and Numbers 9.6-12).

In the previous chapter Jesus has raised Lazarus from the dead. Now there are no more such 'signs', but instead an act of loving devotion. Why did Jesus return to the home of Lazarus? (a) he is being provocative (cf. John 12.9-11)? (b) he wanted to see his friends again? (c) he is preparing for his entry into Jerusalem?

'They gave a dinner for him' (v.2). This is not the Last Supper but it is a time of fellowship for Jesus and his disciples. Does Mary's unusual action indicate that she knew something of what was coming, or is it simply an act of gratitude, love, and care?

Who is this Mary? She is sister of Martha and Lazarus (11.1-2). It is unlikely that she was 'the woman who was a sinner' of Luke 7.37.

The perfume Mary uses, nard, would cost the equivalent of a year's wages for a labourer. Is such extravagance justified? Could Judas' point about waste have some validity, despite his unworthy motives?

Jesus sees in Mary's action a connection with his future burial (v.7). Would Mary have seen it like this, or perhaps as a kingly anointing (though done to the feet rather than the head)?

The anointing is completed by Nicodemus, after Jesus' death, using a similarly large quantity of myrrh and aloes (19.39).

Quotations

1

We are called upon to give as much as we have, and more: as much as we are. So the measure of our love is theoretically without limit. The

2

more we desire to give ourselves in charity, the more charity we will have to give ...

Charity is the life and the riches of His Kingdom, and those who are greatest in it who are least: that is, who have kept nothing for themselves, retaining nothing but their desire to give.

No Man is an Island / Thomas Merton. 1955. p.145

2

Faith in God's love encompasses the call and the obligation to respond with sincere love to divine charity. The first commandment enjoins us to love God above everything and all creatures for him and because of him.

Catechism of the Catholic Church. 1994. §2093

3

As soon as we are with God in faith and in love, we are in prayer.

François Fenelon, 1651–1715

Related topics

For further study:

Paschal mystery; charity; adoration

Closing Prayer

God, before whom we bow in adoration,
make our prayer fragrant
as precious perfume before you.
Let our praise be proven true
by the practice of hope and faith.

Set our sights on the destiny that lies ahead,
and our hearts on Christ, our goal and prize.

We ask this in his name,
who is one with you and the Holy Spirit,
now and for ever.

Collect for Lent 5, Year C²

² *Celebrating the Christian Year: Prayers and Resources for Sundays, Holy Days and Festivals: Years A, B and C* / compiled by Alan Griffiths. – 3 vols. – Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2004-5.

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