

Because we have been reading Luke through the early days of Lent, some background is necessary as we switch suddenly (and briefly) to John's point of view. Lazarus dies, and is raised by Jesus. Not before Jesus demonstrates his humanity, by weeping at his friend's grave. Jesus prayer; Jesus presence; Jesus command; something has freed Lazarus from the bonds of death, and whatever it is has people talking... but fear drives these conversation.

Fear of the unknown; fear of the real power of God; fear that their assumptions - their comfortable certainties - are now rendered useless because of the activities of this one, insistent seeker from Nazareth. We call Jesus our prophet, priest and king, but to those whose religious views he challenged, Jesus was trouble, with a capital "T". So as the Passover festival approaches, Jesus opponents begin actively searching for a way to find him, and have him arrested. This is the setting for this morning's lesson from the Gospel according to John.

John, whose account of Jesus ministry brings him continually to the Holy Capital, Jerusalem. John, whose focus on the miraculous begins with water turned to wine, and ends here, with Lazarus once again among the living. That may well have been the reason behind the dinner; Martha served, Lazarus was "at table"; the stage was set for a great celebration - the kind that still precedes many of our own significant events. Consider this the 'rehearsal party' (*the 'next-to-last-supper'*) - all the major players gathered for one last hurrah before the main event...except the main event is nothing so celebratory as a wedding; they are preparing for a confrontation - a showdown - and the party ends in confusion.

Mary - John reminds us (back in the previous chapter) that this is Martha's sister, for there are several Mary's to choose from - Mary falls at Jesus' feet and covers them with perfume. Foot-washing was ordinarily an act of hospitality shown to a traveller by the host, an act that is meant to refresh a weary traveller - meant to sooth tired feet at the end of a hot, dusty road. It is a restorative gesture, and appropriately intimate, being the sort of thing that happens regularly in decent households. But not this time. In Mary's case, it is also extravagant, and her decision to dry Jesus' feet with her hair makes it intimate in a way that many would consider inappropriate. And then there's the cost! Three hundred denarii - a princely sum - at least that's what Judas thinks it's worth. John is already counting Judas among the damned with that little aside about Judas' criminal tendencies - though as it happens, there must have been some questions about this 'over-the-top' welcome that Mary offered.

Aren't you curious? don't you wonder why an common courtesy was turned into a statement about charity and mortality? "You always have the poor...but you do not always have me." John's gospel here brings us to the very heart of the matter. Six days before Passover - the beginning of the end for this strange band of travellers - John's gospel is about to unveil Jesus' plan.

For the next five chapters, John records Jesus' thoughts, prayers and plans for his disciples. John has Jesus 'lay it out'; betrayal; denial; death and reunion.

Through it all winds the gift of the Holy Spirit - the wind of God that will blow fresh life into these weary wanderers. And to set the stage, Mary bathes Jesus' feet in fragrance, and turns this cultural ritual into an act of worship; an act of love.

Jesus gets it - right away. He does not resist this gift, for he recognizes that Mary is making a statement in grand style. It's the sort of thing Jesus himself would do - prophetic, and upsetting, and offered without apology. Jesus is quick to defend Mary to Judas particularly, but his words sting our ears too. We have judged this 'woman' and her offering; we have imagined better uses for costly things; we have been unsettled by excessive displays of affection, and Jesus speaks also to our judgements.

Do we misunderstand one another's good intentions? Are we suspicious of those who seem extravagant in their love of God? Is it possible that we are so unnerved by acts of grace and love that we can't really appreciate them...? That seems to be true of Judas, whatever other problems he may have had. And if it is true of us, too.

If we are immune to prophetic actions, and embarrassed by Mary's gesture of gratitude - then we will be appalled by what happens next. For everything that happens in Jesus' life; every step he takes on the road to Jerusalem; each act of defiance (or foolishness) that marks his way to the cross is an intentional act of love. Even as friends honour him for the miracle of Lazarus' revival, Jesus would have them see the bigger picture.

The purpose of his work - his life - is to bring glory to God. For that he is prepared to die - and so he equates Mary's actions as preparation for his burial; a gruesome and glorious truth, all in the name of love.

For the love of God, Jesus insists that ritual cannot replace relationship.

For the love of God, Jesus resists authority when that authority is oppressive or arrogant.

For the love of God, Jesus accepts a gift so rare - so precious - that it is meant to be used only once. And when he is reminded of the cost, or when his views on compassion are misrepresented, Jesus reminds us that such acts of love will cost him his life.

The lesson is not "that God so loved the world" - not yet. The lesson is that we in the world can love God following Jesus' example - without reservation; without counting the cost; without a thought for personal glory.

Jesus lesson doesn't make our journey easier; there are hard days ahead, no matter how diligently we follow his example. But our faith assures us that such love as we offer is always overwhelmed by the love that God offers us. That is the lesson that awaits us; an empty tomb, the boldest expression of that gracious, life-giving love.