

John 12:1-8 Martha, Mary, Lazarus and the family secret

How I wish I had an hour to talk with you about this wonderful story of the meal at the home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus at the beginning of the last week of the earthly life Jesus; there are so many truths to be drawn from it. But before I come to those truths let me give you something of the background; but before I can do even that I must give you a word of warning. Much of what I will share with you about that background is surmise which I cannot prove although it fits all the facts the Bible gives us. However, I think you'll find it interesting and even if it is incorrect that does not affect the lessons I will draw from the story a little later.

Have you ever realised that we do not know how Jesus came to meet this family? The first mention we have of them is in Luke's Gospel when we are told that a woman named Martha opened her home to Jesus and his disciples when he came to Bethany. Why would she do that? Even allowing for the legendary hospitality common in the Middle East, it is quite a thing to have an extra 13 people to dinner especially if they are strangers. You will recall that this was the occasion when Martha got upset because her sister Mary was sitting at the feet of Jesus listening to him while she was left to get the meal ready by herself.

We next hear of them from John whose only introduction of them is to say that a man named Lazarus was sick, and he came from Bethany the village of Mary and her sister Martha. But, again, there is no indication of how Jesus first met them. Also there is a very strange fact; neither of these sisters nor their brother was married. In that society that was most unusual – we can accept that one of them might not yet been married; we can possibly stretch that to two, unusual as that may be; but for all three to be unmarried provokes the question, was there some overriding reason why none of them was married? I want to suggest a

reason, but I would remind you it can be no more than a suggestion, powerful though it is.

In Mark's gospel we have a report of Jesus having a meal in a house in Bethany shortly before the institution of the Lord's Supper. He also records that in the course of the meal a woman, who is not named, anointed him with perfume (so he is obviously referring to the same event as in our reading from John's Gospel). However, Mark does record one interesting piece of information; he says that the meal was held in the home of a man known as Simon the Leper. We haven't heard of him before and we don't hear of him again. As I explained, referring to the first occasion, Luke says that Mary invited Jesus and his disciples into *her* house, but here is Mark saying it is the home of Simon the leper. So what is the truth? Well, what if Simon were the father of Martha, Mary and Lazarus? If he was a leper it is not surprising that all three of his children were unmarried. There is a further point; if Jesus knew the family well, as the gospel records imply, surely it is unlikely that he would leave Simon's leprosy unhealed. I suggest that Jesus had in fact healed Simon which is why the family were so grateful that Mary opened her house to him with his disciples. That would also explain why, instead of saying that Jesus was in the home of Simon the leper, Mark states that he was in the home of a man *known* as Simon the leper. Simon was now healed but was known to everyone in the village as he had always been known – Simon the leper.

Well I must now turn to the events of the meal itself. John says that Jesus had come to Jerusalem for the Passover and was staying in Bethany where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead, and he adds that a meal was given in Jesus' honour. Once again, Martha served while (and how important this is) Lazarus was among those at table with him. Can you imagine how very different that meal would have been if Jesus had not raised Lazarus from the dead a few weeks earlier? If

there had been any meal at all everyone would have been aware of the empty chair; a dearly loved brother (and if I am right about Simon, a dearly loved son) would not have been with them. As it was it was a time of rejoicing; Simon had been healed of his leprosy and now Lazarus had been restored to life. This was a time of celebration. Of all of them sitting round the table only one had a heavy heart and that was Jesus. The burden of what lay ahead – the betrayal and the cross were known to him and had filled his mind as his little band neared Jerusalem. He was so preoccupied that, probably without realising it, he had gone striding ahead of his disciples, so determined was he to accomplish his Father's will. But he would not allow his personal distress to spoil the joy of his hosts. The meal was given in his honour and there would be time enough for them to mourn later.

Let me pause there for just a moment to remind you that when any group of people meet together, as we meet this morning, they come with different agendas. Some will be rejoicing and celebrating – perhaps they have just got engaged, or a new baby has arrived, or they have passed some exam. Others will be anxious; they have just received bad news from the hospital, or a loved one has died. The first time I came face to face with death with anyone close to me was when my father died, of a good old age. I remember setting off for the undertaker to arrange the funeral and seeing everyone else going about their daily business and thinking, "You can't do this; my father has just died," even while I realised how ridiculous my thoughts were. Of course the life of the world cannot be stopped for any one individual's experience of joy or sorrow; but we do need to be aware of the different needs of each person even if we cannot meet those needs personally, and with those close to us we need to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep.

It was during the meal that Mary is overwhelmed with her gratitude and her love for Jesus and she wants to do something for him. So she goes to get what was, perhaps, her most precious worldly possession, a jar of perfume. John simply describes it as expensive; Mark sets a value on it – over 300 denarii. Now one denari at the time was a labourer’s daily wage, so the perfume was worth about a year’s earnings. Where did Mary get such a gift? Forgive me if I let my imagination run riot and let me stress that this *is* my imagination. Could it have been a gift, perhaps from her mother? It seems that her mother had died. After all, it was Martha who was running the household, not Simon’s wife, Martha’s mother. Was this perfume something that Mary was saving perhaps for her wedding – if that should ever happen? Certainly it seems that she was keeping it for something. But her heart was so full to bursting in her devotion to Jesus that she takes what Mark describes as an alabaster jar, so it wasn’t just pottery, and breaks it and pours it over Jesus. John says it was over his feet, but Mark says it was over his head. We need not find any discrepancy here; what John remembers is that Mary wiped the feet of Jesus with her hair, whereas Mark does not refer to that.

Isn’t that a wonderful gesture? this spontaneous self-giving act of Mary in gratitude and love? She doesn’t even keep the jar. I do not think that she could continue for very long at such a pitch of devotion; nor can we. But let me ask you, have you *ever* felt at any time in your life; an overwhelming burst of love and gratitude toward Jesus? Perhaps it is like Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration wanting to build tabernacles on the summit for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. But he had to come down from the mountain top with Jesus; there was a father there with his son possessed by a demon which the other disciples were not able to drive out, and they were needed. But Peter had had a mountain top experience with Jesus; have you? A time when you have said to him, “Anything, anywhere for you”? Perhaps such an

experience depends upon how deeply you have realised just what Jesus gave for you.

But there is another side to this. Mark says that some of those who were there objected to Mary's action saying that if she had wanted to show her gratitude she could have given the jar of perfume to be sold and the money given to the poor; something dear to the heart of Jesus; he had encouraged them to care for the poor. The truth is, they were right and Jesus acknowledges that to some degree. He says,

You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me. [John 12:8]

And you will remember that he also taught that whatever we give to another person who is in need, we do it to him. So giving to the poor is something we can do today out of our gratitude to Christ, and in doing that we are doing it to him. So we do need thoughtful and practical common sense. I have to admit that when I was an incumbent I got very frustrated with people who were so heavenly minded that they were no earthly use. They wanted to commit the PCC to spending money we didn't have because, so they argued, it was the Lord's work and the Lord would provide. I took the rather prosaic view that he could provide before we spent the money rather than after. I do not deny that there are times when the Lord calls us to move forward in faith alone that he will provide; and certainly I have done that on occasions – but I have always been as sure as I can be that *he* has called me to do so, and it is not my own leading. It is the difference between trusting God and testing God. The latter is what the devil was attempting to get Jesus to do in the wilderness.

John, in his account of the incident, is more specific than Mark. He says that the objection came from Judas Iscariot and he adds the information that Judas was the treasurer of that little band of Jesus and his disciples; he kept their communal money-bag. And

he adds the startling assertion that he was a thief and helped himself to its contents. This throws a new light on Judas. In discussing why Judas betrayed Jesus, some commentators put forward the view that it was because he did believe Jesus was the Messiah but that he needed a push to reveal himself. Judas thought that if he told the Jewish authorities how they could arrest Jesus, then he, Jesus, would never allow that and he would be forced to work a miracle to deliver himself and take up his role as the expected deliverer of God's chosen people. In that case, why did he negotiate a price for his betrayal? For myself, I don't accept that reasoning, and here we are told that apart from being a betrayer he was a thief.

But let's leave all that aside. The point here was the motive in Mary's heart. The jar of perfume was not, so far as we know, the property of anyone but herself; no one else was impoverished by what she did with it. She loved so deeply that she gave!

Just two more brief comments. Mary's act of devotion had a greater effect than she knew. First, Jesus puts it into a particular context. Remember, he was burdened with the ordeal that lay ahead of him and he says:

[It was intended] that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. [John 12:7]

For Mary it was a spontaneous act, but in fact her devotion led her to fulfil the will of God without realising it. Mark records that Jesus said, "She did what she could". Isn't that a wonderful epitaph? Imagine having someone say that at your funeral. "She, he, did what they could." God doesn't ask of us the impossible; only that we do what we can - but how many of us do that?

And the final truth I would draw is something John recalls; "The whole house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume." I imagine him as he writes this, reliving the sense of that perfume pervading the whole house. In God's economy he can take what

we do for him and use it to benefit others in ways which we cannot even imagine.

Isn't it a wonderful story? No wonder Jesus said, as Mark records,

I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her. [Mark 14:9]