

The theme is: - The anointing at Bethany Mary's gift.

Chapter 11 verses 1 to 45, deals with the raising of Lazarus from the dead, it is the last of the signs that Jesus performs, which is also the greatest of the signs which St John records, all of which point to God as the author. In verse 32 we are told that Jesus and Mary met somewhere on the road and that when she saw him she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, If you had been here, my brother would not have died." It is clear from what Mary said that she knew Jesus before Lazarus was taken ill and died.

Now at the beginning of chapter 12 Jesus and his disciples are again going to see Lazarus and his family possibly to catch up with how Lazarus is getting on and to see his two sisters, and I'm sure the disciples were also curious to see him following the miracle of being raised from the dead.

Their visit was only 6 days before Passover, according to the first verse of chapter 12, so this visit would be within a few days of the end of Jesus' life here on earth. Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem will probably take place the next day, but of course nobody but Jesus would have known any of that.

Bethany is a small village only a couple of miles from Jerusalem, and would be crowded with pilgrims come to celebrate Passover in Jerusalem. The people of Bethany would do good trade at Passover putting people up who couldn't get accommodation in Jerusalem. By returning to Bethany, Jesus sets in motion the events that will lead to his death. Indeed, it was the popular response to Lazarus' resurrection that led the Jewish authorities to decide to put Jesus to death. This was made clear in the previous chapter eleven in verses 45 to 53, of which verse 53 reads, "So from that day on they planned to put him to death."

In verse 2 of our reading we read, "There they gave a dinner for him." 'They' means Lazarus' family, but also included were Jesus' disciples. Lazarus' family wouldn't have been wealthy people, and a dinner in recognition of what Jesus had done for Lazarus was a lovely gesture which Jesus would have been pleased with, and of course Lazarus would be there, he was one reason for their joyful celebration.

In verse 3 we are told that Mary took a pound of costly nard. The nard plant grows in the Himalayas at an altitude of 10,000 to 16,000 feet, the oil is crushed out of the plant, that's according to Google, and was imported to Israel which would count to a large extent to its high cost. But what comes next in verse 3 is not only a part of their celebration of Lazarus being raised from the dead, but it is also a personal reaction of Mary' love for Jesus. Neither is her actions spontaneous, because normally she would not have such a thing as a pound of pure Nard in her house, and in anointing his feet she is also demonstrating her humble submission to him. Our Heavenly Father places a high premium on humility and love, which are both essential characteristics of a true Christian.

Finally, Mary wiped Jesus feet with her hair. Jewish custom and practice would demand that Jewish women would always keep their hair covered in public, but here Mary does something that Jewish culture would consider as shocking, but in her love for Jesus she is totally uninhibited, and she uses her hair to wipe his feet. It is possible to make a good case

for us to become less inhibited in our love for Jesus. We are told that king David danced and sang with all his might before the ark of the covenant on his entrance to Jerusalem in recognition of his love for God, much to the embarrassment of his wife Rachal, but David didn't care, he was overjoyed for his love of God.

Our main reaction to being a Christian should be one of immense joy and love, as was Mary's overall reaction to Jesus. This is why we have a social committee who arrange various types of entertainment so that we can meet together in fellowship and enjoy each other's company as Christians. But when somebody does something good there is always people who will criticize. I'm sure we have all experienced it from time to time, and here Judas complains because he thinks the money should have been used for a better purpose. and I'm sure there are people who have some sympathy for that view.

In verses 4 to 6 St John takes pains to inform us that Judas is not to be trusted, based it would seem on his reaction to Mary's love, but in Matthew's Gospel chapter 26 verse 8 we read, "But when the disciples saw it, they were angry and said. 'Why this waste.'" and Judas is not mentioned, see also Mark 14:4. Also, it is only St John who accuses Judas of being a thief, which under Jewish law, if it is to be believed, must be substantiated by another witness, but no other disciple supports John's statement. However, there is no doubt whatsoever that Judas did betray Jesus for thirty pieces of silver.

Interestingly, Jesus, in less than a week, at Passover, would wrap a towel around his waist and wash the feet of all his disciples, including Judas who, as Jesus was fully aware, would soon betray him.

Verse 7 reads, "Jesus said, leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial." However, Mary had no intention, or idea, of anointing Jesus for burial, we know that it was through love that she anointed his feet, but she, along with others of his disciples may have been aware that Jesus was in danger, but could not possibly have imagined that he had only a few more days to live.

However, her anointing of Jesus has meaning beyond her understanding, just as Caiaphas' earlier comment revealed a truth beyond his understanding. Caiaphas, who was the high priest, said as recorded in chapter 11 verses 49 to 52 these words, "You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." Here Caiaphas was talking about the salvation of the Israelite nation from the Romans by the death of one man, whereas Jesus' death was actually for the salvation of the whole world for which Caiaphas had not the slightest idea. In the same way whereas Mary anointed Jesus' feet out of her love for him Jesus knew that it was in preparation for his death and burial which he knew was imminent, but of which Mary had no idea.

One of the emotions of grief, is regret for something that was said or not said, done or not done, which now cannot be amended. But Mary has seized the moment, she has made the grand gesture of her love while Jesus was still alive, and in a few days' time she will have no regrets at all with what she did. Mary's extravagance is appropriate, because although unbeknown to her she is preparing his body for burial. We also treat burials with respect. On funeral days, we do things in grander fashion than on other days. Mary spent a fortune

on perfume, and didn't care what the neighbours thought when she anointed Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair. Today the deceased may have preferred overalls, but now is dressed in coat and tie. He may have driven a modest car, but now he rides to the church in a limousine. In Jesus' day, people considered expensive perfume to be appropriate for funerals, just as we consider expensive floral arrangements to be appropriate today.

Verse 8 appears to rebuke Judas for speaking out for the care of the poor when Jesus said, "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." But that cannot be the case, Jesus' ministry had been for the care of all people, and especially for the poor. So, what was meant when Jesus said those words. The real sense of Jesus' comment is that they will have many opportunities to help the poor in the future, which is one of the fundamental requirements of the Jewish law, and which Jesus stressed in so many ways, but they won't always have Jesus present. They need to take advantage of his presence while they can, and Jesus knew it would not be for much longer.

The message for us today is to have faith in Christ as the Son of God, who performed all the miracles recorded in the Bible, and whose greatest miracle was to rise from the dead, demonstrating beyond any possible doubt that he is God's Son and that there is life after death. In Hebrews 11:1 we have these words, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

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