

Sermon 7 April 2019 (John 12.1-8)

Today's Gospel reading is yet another example of the wonderful complexity of the Gospel of John. As with all passages of Holy Scripture, it is best viewed through a variety of contextual lenses including the literal, the mystical and the historical. By doing so, we might find the best path, or paths, to assist in developing our understanding of our relationship with God.

Bear in mind, however, that the intention of the Gospel writer, or writers, is clearly expressed in John

“...Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name...” (John 20.30)

Remember that whatever contextual lens (literal, mystical or historical) engages you the most, the intention of the Gospel writer is clear and you should be guided by a knowledge of this fact.

So let us exclude the rest of John from our thoughts and and consider what these words might mean if simply taken literally.

The key points are that

a dinner was given at which Jesus was present. We do not know who the host was but Lazarus and Judas Iscariot were fellow diners. Lazarus's sister, Mary, was present but serving rather than as a guest

Mary took a pound of Nard (worth 300 denarii or a years pay) and anointed Jesus feet with a portion of the Nard. (Jesus expected the rest of the Nard would be used on the day of his burial.

Judas expressed outrage at the waste of such a valuable commodity which could have been sold and the proceeds used for the poor.

Jesus admonishes Judas stating that the poor will always be present but that he will not always be

On the surface this is a troubling statement somewhat at odds with Luke 10.25 (The Good Samaritan) and Matthew 25.31 (The Returning King).

But is it really? People then and now will always put their money where their heart is. Jesus is simply saying “Your heart belongs to me to whom you must devote everything. But remember that you should love your neighbour as yourself. Not love your neighbour more than me”

Well that is one explanation anyway!

Another possible explanation here is that Jesus accepts that the Nard should have been sold and the proceeds applied to the relief of the poor but that this case must be an exception to the rule justified on the basis that there will always be poor people to assist. Which is sadly true!

In fact, Bethany, where the meal occurred, was a site of an almshouse for the poor and a place of care for the sick. It was established as such during the reign of Herod the Great by Essenes and Jews concerned with social welfare. So Jesus comment here is the literal truth

But what about a mystical interpretation here? Well, again take this scene in isolation from the rest of John and imagine a dining scene. You are standing in a large room lit by a number of oil lamps. There is a triclinium comprised of three couches in the centre of the room forming a “U”. In the middle, between the couches there is a table on which a variety of foods are being shared by the guests. There are three guests to each couch reclining on their left sides while eating and drinking with their right hands while engaged in conversation with each other. Their feet are bare and face away from the food. A number of attendants are

moving around the couches replenishing the food and wine on the table, including Mary, whose hair is covered for modesty.

Prior to lying down for dinner, each guest has had their hands and feet carefully washed and all are barefoot. Mary leaves the room momentarily then returns to Jesus's feet with a small jar which she opens. She kneels at Jesus feet and pours a portion of oil on Jesus feet then rubs the oil in. The oil is Nard or Spikenard a rare aromatic.

The guests watch with surprise as Mary uncovers her hair in an act of surprising intimacy, then wipes the excess oil from Jesus feet with her hair. Mary anoints Jesus, the "anointed one" not as a prophet anoints a king on the head but on the feet in an act of sacramental reverence. Jesus, "Logos", God anointed by a woman, not a man. Not by the powerful but by the weak.

The room fills with the smell of the precious Nard. What must this scene have been like to witness first hand? Well the overpowering smell of the Nard must have been a memorable feature here.

Have you ever smelt Nard or Spikenard? Well let us see what it is like and imagine what this dinner scene must have been like to experience first hand. Perhaps in our meditation we may occasionally be moved as those present must have been.

So much for one possible mystical interpretation.

So what of an historical or logical interpretation? What can we glean from an analysis of this passage?

Well a similar incident seems to be reported in the synoptic Gospels. But the timeframe and other inconsistencies suggests that those are separate to today's reading. Jesus' head is anointed in Matthew (Matthew 26.7) and Mark (Mark 14.3) while there is no nard, just ointment in Luke (Luke 7.37)

Of course, John was written in Ephesus where the church consisted of Jews and gentiles, males and females. The non Jewish members would have been less aware of Jewish scripture and imagery than their Jewish origin counterparts.

So how would a non-Jewish gentile have interpreted this passage?

To consider this we need to be very clear. The Hellenistic concept of divinity was markedly different to our own. We largely follow the Judaic concept. An almighty omnipresent creator God. The Greeks were polytheist. And Gods like Zeus had sons like Apollo, also a God. In turn Apollo had sons such as Orpheus, worshipped as a demigod. Even emperors, dead and living could be "gods". So to say that Jesus was the "son of God" would not mean the same to a gentile as to a Jew.

So how does John get around this problem and merge Jewish and Hellenistic concepts of divinity to describe the nature of Jesus?

First, John begins with the sonorous identification of Jesus as "Logos" or Word, a philosophers concept first articulated by Heraclitus, from Ephesus. Jesus coexistent with the creator God prior to the act of creation.

Second, the cult of Artemis was very well established in Ephesus when John was written. Originating as an Anatolian "earth mother" cult, it had changed over 800 years to the point where Artemis was seen as the "tutelary deity" of the city, protecting the safety of the city and the fortunes of its citizens. She also had a role in safeguarding childbirth among other causes. She was worshipped at the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus which was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World: a lavishly furnished temple similar in architecture to the Acropolis in Athens but three times the size!

At the centre of temple worship was a rather small statue of Artemis herself, perhaps two metres high. Pliny the Elder (His Nat 17.79, 213-216) claims that all writers "except Mucianus" described the statue as being made of ebony, a black hardwood.

Other statues of Artemis from Ephesus at this time show an ebony figure with elaborate headdress and clothing. Only the black wood face and neck, hands and feet are visible.

Now Pliny says the ebony statue was anointed with nard to protect the timber from splitting.

Of course, devotees here would have believed the statue to be an apotheosis of Artemis herself. That is divine. A pathway to Artemis. It seems likely that a woman having lived through through a successful birth would bring a gift of nard to anoint the goddess. Others may have shown their devotion in a similar manner.

If the nard was poured through a crevice in the covering of the ebony statue, the nard would have seeped under the covering and emerged at the exposed ebony feet. If anointed on the feet it would also have pooled there. Now, nard then and now is expensive and a devotee seeing the nard dripping onto the plinth on which the statue stood would likely scoop it up and rub it through his or her hair.

In some cases, the hair itself would likely have been used to soak up any excess nard in a manner very similar to Mary's response. In both cases the strong and evocative aroma of nard would be very evident. As it was at the feast at Bethany.

In other words, to a convert from the cult of Artemis at Ephesus, this story would represent Mary recognising Jesus' divinity and anointing his feet in a manner similar to the way the statue of Artemis at Ephesus was worshipped. The odour and the act of reverence would have seemed perfectly in place. Jesus identified with the divine. But not just some divine offspring of one of the many Olympian Gods but identified with the most important divine presence in Ephesus.

So what does this mean? Well many people see Christian texts as being male dominated, perhaps to the point of being misogynistic. And I must admit there is a very obvious gender bias in the Gospel of John.

Let me explain.

The first miracle, the transformation of the water to wine at the wedding at Cana, is called for by a woman.: Mary, mother of Jesus who is adored in many parts of the Christian world as "mother of God" (theotokis).

Jesus first confides his messianic purpose to a woman. The Samaritan woman at the well. (John 4.4-26) and this woman is remembered in the Eastern Churches as St Photine, the "equal to the apostles" who was martyred during the Neronian persecution.

Martha, sister of Mary and Lazarus, is the first person to acknowledge Jesus explicitly as Son of God (John 11.24) when she exclaims "... I believe you are the Christ, the Son of God..."). Note here the identification is in the Jewish concept of divinity.

In today's reading, Martha's sister Mary recognises Jesus as divine as we have seen when she anoints his feet with nard and wipes the surplus off with her hair. But divinity within the Hellenistic tradition.

Now this is really interesting. Jewish law required two witnesses to bear testimony to the truth. Prior to the crucifixion, the two witnesses to acclaim Jesus' divinity are Martha and Mary, two sisters, and after the resurrection the critical witness is Thomas Didymus (Thomas meaning twin in Aramaic and Didymus twin in Greek. This gives us a hint at the complex compositional structure which underpins John's Gospel.

Three named women, Jesus' mother Mary, her sister Mary, wife of Cleopas, and Mary Magdalene are present and speak to him while he is on the Cross. (John 19.26-27). There is a male disciple present as well but he is not named beyond being referred to as "...the disciple who he loved...". Probably John. (John 19.26-27). Again this is important. An early heresy, docetism, held that Jesus' body was not human and that he did not suffer on the Cross. The named witnesses countering this claim were women.

Mary Magdalene, a woman, is the first person to realise that the stone door to Jesus' tomb has been opened. (John 20.1). Male disciples explore the tomb finding linen cloths only. They leave and Mary, a woman, is the first to find the risen Lord. Before any male. (John 20.16).

So there is a clear gender bias. Toward women. It seems women are vital to John's narrative. Women play a key role in this Gospel as they did in the early Eastern Church. Women were important in the life of the church then as they are today.

Let us pray,

Almighty God we give you thanks for the devotion and insight we have from women in the Gospel of John especially remembering Martha and Mary, sisters of Lazarus. May their example inspire us all to understand your nature and love for us all



Pliny Chapter 79 His Nat

“He states, also, that, by the aid of numerous apertures, it is soaked with nard, in order that the moist nature of that drug may preserve the wood and keep the seams close together: I am rather surprised, however, that there should be any seams in the statue, considering the very moderate size it is.”

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