

This morning's Gospel story of the anointing of Jesus comes from John's Gospel. We had been reading Luke through most of Epiphany and Lent, but now we hear from John for this important scene, right before Jesus enters Jerusalem for the last week of his life.

If we were on a rollercoaster ride, we would now be in the time of the car's slow clack, clackety, clack, clack, clack up the steep slope towards the high apex of the ride. Everything seems calm right now. Jesus is enjoying a dinner and conversation with his disciples. The view is nice as we climb higher and higher. Right now we can look around and enjoy the scenery. But no one on a roller coaster ride is fooled. We all know what happens after we reach the top of the ride.

Jesus knew too what it meant that Jerusalem and the Passover were just ahead. There would be the joyous Hosannas of his followers, but also he would be heading into the lion's den of the Pharisees and scribes, and Roman leaders and those who sought to kill him.

Once you strap into the seat of a roller coaster ride there's no getting off. You are in it for the duration. This is not a great metaphor for what Jesus experienced, though. And maybe it's my fear of roller coasters that makes it seem like a good example. Jesus and his disciples couldn't choose to skip parts of the sad and tragic Holy Week, and neither should we if we truly mean to follow Jesus.

In this Gospel reading John wants us to know certain things that set up the week and begin to focus our attention on what happened in those last days. This reading is short, but there's a lot packed into it: Jesus has a dinner with friends, it's been called the "First dinner"<sup>i</sup> since it comes just before Jesus enters Jerusalem as opposed to the last supper.

This is first and foremost a dinner that ends it all and begins it all. Jesus has ended his ministry in the regions of Galilee and Judea. Bethany is a couple of miles outside of Jerusalem, but the important thing is...it's outside. Here we see intimacy of friendship with the anointing. We see the anger of Judas which would lead to his betrayal, and we hear the words Jesus speaks that signal to us that the end is near.

We are invited to witness a warm and inviting scene where Mary, Martha and Lazarus are eating dinner together with Jesus. The disciples were there too, but we are only privy to what one disciple, Judas, says. The others must have been there. Jesus would hardly have had just Judas as his only companion at this dinner when he seemed to have much preferred the company of Peter, James and John. Martha cooks and serves, as usual. I wonder what she served? Research shows that customary meals in those times were composed of bread, fruits and vegetables, lentils, dates and nuts. Stews made with lentils and vegetables were very common. Bread was commonly flatish, like a pita and could be folded over and used as a spoon to scoop up stew.

Remember how Mary, who in another story was found listening to Jesus and sitting at his feet? Now she anoints the feet of Jesus with a costly and fragrant perfume. She doesn't take a towel to wipe his

feet, but her hair. It is an act of great love and intimacy. And maybe that's one of the reasons Judas speaks out.

Perhaps he's jealous or embarrassed by Mary's actions. Perhaps he's blustering about the money because Mary's action of love makes him feel like an outsider, which he certainly will be. Jealousy, pride, envy; I'm trying to imagine the emotions that led Judas to the eventual deadly act of betraying our Lord. Whatever the reason, Judas has not understood the significance of what Mary is doing, or of Jesus' words.

He is being anointed now out of great caring love and in preparation or foreshadowing of the arrest and crucifixion. Something new is about to happen. Isaiah's passage this morning speaks of God doing a new thing. This week for Jesus, for the people following The Way, and for us, this is the once-and-for-all new thing that God does for us; to give us faith, show us love and grant us our salvation.

The only ones who speak in this passage are Judas and Jesus. Jesus answers Judas and comes to the defense of Mary and her actions. Jesus knows the significance of the anointing, and what it tells about the events to come. He has the last word over Judas who **seems** to care about the poor. Jesus wants to show that as wrong-headed thinking.

We have heard people use this expression in a callous or a hopeless way, "You always have the poor with you" (and then we add in our minds...so there's nothing to be done about it.) It seems out of character that Jesus should tell his disciples to favor him over the disadvantaged. Jesus would never throw up his hands and say, "Oh well, I can't help everybody." But here is a case where knowing the original context is so important for seeing what a verse really means.

The original verse is from Deuteronomy Chapter 15: *"Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land." Deuteronomy 15:11* Jesus isn't saying that it's a shame but there's nothing to be done about the people in need. He's saying that while we always have an obligation to take care of others and that continues, now is the time to focus on what will happen in the coming week. The Passion of Jesus should be our focus this week.

Palm Sunday is just around the corner, and Easter will be here momentarily. Lent seemed like such a long season when we were back at Ash Wednesday, but now everything is moving at a rapid pace. Jesus is in Bethany, just outside of the city of Jerusalem. Soon Jesus will enter triumphantly, and the Passion of our Lord will begin to unfold.

Just as you would never consider jumping off a roller coaster ride during the scary part and then getting back on just as it cruises into the station, I encourage all of you to stay with the ride of your life, stay with Jesus in this most holy season of the church year. Press on as Paul did to the goal of (fully) knowing Christ and his resurrection.

---

<sup>i</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, "Knowing and preaching the Jewish Jesus", [Christiancentury.org](http://Christiancentury.org) for April 3, 2022.