

Views for the Pews: Lent 5, Passion Sunday

Imagine the scene. Jesus and his disciples and some close friends are together, enjoying table fellowship with the Master while they could. Everyone knew that Jesus and his companions were all in imminent danger from the temple authorities now searching for a way to arrest him, and they feared the consequences, for his mission and for themselves, if they were caught. The atmosphere was also more tense than usual because the guests included Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. The people watching Lazarus eat his dinner must have had a lot of unanswered questions about what his experience during that four days in the tomb says about death. Yet Jesus himself seemed to be quite unconcerned by the fearful anxiety among the group, and was, as always, in full control of himself and all his surroundings.

Then came an unexpected and dramatic intrusion into their conversation. Mary produced an alabaster box of spikenard, a very expensive, amber-coloured aromatic oil used as an incense offering in the Temple, and to prepare a body for burial. Mary broke the alabaster box, and lovingly anointed Jesus' bare feet with the oil. The perfume must have filled the house, while the witnesses struggled to understand the reason for Mary's excessive gesture.

Lazarus might have recognised the perfume, if he had been treated the same way before he was placed in his tomb, and it would have been a painful reminder for him. Those of the disciples who realised that Mary's action was signalling the end of Jesus's ministry might have wanted to object, or escape, or to fight to defend him (Peter carried a sword, and later attempted to use it). Judas interpreted Mary's extravagance as a waste of money, a dramatic contrast with his own attitude. Jesus himself was the calm in the centre of the confusion. He simply acknowledged that his death was imminent, because its time had come. His words to the others about Mary, as her beloved Lord seeking both to rebuke Judas and to reassure her that her costly sacrifice was accepted, would be shocking if they were not so familiar. "Let her alone, let her keep it for the day of my burial".

Mary, whose opinion and actions were completely misinterpreted by the others, was the only one who truly saw Jesus for who he was, and recognise her last chance to worship him.

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