

Reflections for Holy Week – Tuesday

Committing my thoughts 'to paper' a week in advance does mean that they will not be tweaked further – my normal way of working, so I hope you will bear with me.

Also, I am not going to put in music links as I do not think that is necessary. If possible, use your own choice of quiet music before and during your reading. My preference is to use Margaret Rizza's chants.

So settle yourself as if you are arriving for the reflection by listening to some quiet music.

The theme for today is Anointing at Bethany

Perhaps, like me, you immediately thought of the story as told by Matthew or Mark (Matthew 26:6-13, Mark 14:3-9) – especially if you were involved in the productions of Roger Jones' musical Mary Magdalene. The incident takes place at the home of Simon, who had been cured of dreaded skin-disease, when an un-named woman arrives with an alabaster jar filled with expensive perfume and pours it on Jesus' head. It has been assumed that this woman was Mary Magdalene, the woman caught in adultery.

However, in the lectionary for this year, the passage is from John's gospel, lets read this now.

John 12:1-8 New International Version (NIV)

Jesus Anointed at Bethany

12 Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. ² Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honour. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. ³ Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

⁴ But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, ⁵ "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages."

⁶ He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

⁷ "Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. ⁸ You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me."

The incident has moved to the house of Lazarus – see it reminds us that this is the man who Jesus raised from the dead. However, if we look at chapter 11, verse 2, we are told that that the Mary whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.

Is this a chicken and egg situation? Which came first – or is John making sure that we make the connection?

Following Lazarus being raised from the dead, there were two main reactions – those for whom it inspired belief in Jesus and those, like the high priests and Pharisees who planned to kill Jesus.

At the dinner party, Martha, as usual, is preparing and serving the meal; Lazarus is at the table, talking with the guests. Then the focus turns to Mary. When Jesus visited the home previously, we know that Mary took time to sit and listen to what Jesus had to say, annoying her sister by her inaction. Now, she annoys others by her action.

Mary pours out her faith and gratitude in this extravagant gesture. Jesus tells the guests who complain to let her do what she must do, just as at another meal he tells Judas to do what he has to do quickly – but more of that tomorrow.

Mary is the one who understands what Jesus has been saying, she has been inspired by what he has done for her family and responds in the way that she is able.

May we study and ‘be with Jesus’, listen to what he wants from us and respond as we are able.

Listen to some quiet music as you think about the reading

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Meditation of Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus

I'd scrimped and saved for that perfume,
for it spoke of luxury,
style,
sophistication.
It was my chance to be a lady –
to turn heads,
walk tall –
yet, having made it mine,
I gave it away in a single extravagant gesture,
an outpouring of love.
Profligate, some called it –
headstrong folly –
and yes, maybe it was over the top.
Yet it seemed natural at the time,
for I wanted to offer Jesus something special –
not just any old gift
but one of real value,
speaking straight from the heart.
So I took that perfume and anointed his feet,
wiping them clean with my hair.
You should have smelt the place:
Overpowering or what!

Like a brothel, I thought,
a boudoir,
a place of burial.
And that latter thought clearly struck Jesus,
for he spoke suddenly of death,
of being taken from us,
almost as though he were already a corpse
and I the embalmer.
We were shocked,
stunned,
dismissing the idea as nonsense,
but a week later he was dead,
cut down from a cross and sealed in a tomb,
anointed for burial again.
It had seemed costly, that gift of mine,
An example of self-denial,
but suddenly it felt pathetically small,
for the true sacrifice was his.
I'd offered a *little* –
he'd given his *all*.

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, I think I know what it means to deny myself, but in reality I have little idea. I content myself with token actions – a hunger lunch, perhaps, a temporary renunciation of some little luxury, a few extra pounds given to charity – and then I pat myself on the back, as though I've achieved something special, truly gone without. Remind me of the immensity of *your* sacrifice – your willingness to endure not only death, but the weight of human evil, in order to redeem me and bring me life. Help me, conscious of that awesome love, to understand what self-denial really means, and more meaningfully to put it into practice. Amen

Listen to more quiet music as you ponder the meditation and pray from Nick

Finally, spend some time in prayer as you are led – in silence or with those around you.

We pray for any we know to be in need; for those who are ill and those who will never recover and those who wait with them; for those facing important decisions and for those unsure of what tomorrow will bring. We pray for our neighbours, our family and our friends and any we know who need to hear of the love of God, to feel the touch of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ upon their hearts and to experience the life-changing power of the Holy Spirit. We pray for any we know to be in need, that their needs might be met by God. Amen

Finish by saying The Grace – imagining those who you can't be with at the moment but who will also be saying joining in.