



**Oil for the Burial – Palms for the Messiah**

**Bethany: The Sweet Home of Love (John 12:1-11)**

Six days before his final Passover, Jesus went to Bethany to the home of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. Pilgrims had already jammed the holy city of Jerusalem. Overflow crowds stayed at suburban villages such as Bethany. Martha cooked a festive meal. Family and friends celebrated the resurrection of their beloved Lazarus. Love had conquered death. Jesus, the embodiment of absolute love, reclined at table next to a man risen from the dead.

In the middle of the songs, stories, memories, and toasts of that glorious meal, Mary knelt before Jesus, took a pound of expensive perfume and anointed his feet, exuberantly giving him all the contents of the alabaster container. The perfume was spikenard, a sweet oil extracted from a plant in the Himalayas and imported from India. She unbound her hair and used it to dry his feet.

Martha had been the principal figure in the account of the resurrection of Lazarus. She left her home and went out to meet Jesus. Her dialogue of faith with him was the central commentary on the event about to happen. Her confession of faith concluded the narrative, John's gospel presents the typical Martha, extroverted, action oriented, slightly argumentative, loving, serving – and uncontestedly a woman of profound faith.

Mary is the central person in the Bethany meal. Silence contains her. No words. No dramatic dialogues. No protests or arguments. This silent woman let her body do the talking. Kneeling in front of Jesus, she used up a bottle of perfume to anoint his feet. Then she dried them with her hair. Period. Let others do the talking, which they did.

Mary illustrated the nature of love's generosity and total self giving to another. Love does not worry much about the cost of a gift to the beloved. The gift must symbolize the total surrender of true love, regardless of the price which may be big or small. If the price is small, but that is all one has, that is total giving. Mary focused her loving attention completely on Jesus. Her deed was simplicity itself, humble, direct, uncomplicated, selfless, loving.

The powerful sweetness of the perfume filled the whole house. In telling this story, Mark and Matthew state that the fame of Mary's action would spread to the whole church. The Fathers of the church taught that the impact of her love for Jesus would fill the church.

Judas missed the loving purpose of Mary's deed and complained that she had just wasted enough money to pay a worker's wages for one year. Sounding smug, practical, even conscientious about the plight of the poor, Judas spoiled the festive tone of the celebration. He wielded guilt just when everyone was captivated by love. This charmless man stomped on the genial feelings of the community and insisted they have more concern for the poor.

His grumpy scolding of that cheerful group was confusing and unsettling. This was no self centered, heartless gathering of greedy people. These were people who believed in helping others and being concerned for the poor. Instinctively, they would never have been a contraction between the pure act of love they just saw and their moral obligations to the needy. They could easily have said, as Irish country people do, here is a man who came from a home that never bred a dream. Love and justice are friends not enemies.

In principle they did not deny they needed encouraging reminders to help the poor, but the timing was off. Jesus took their unspoken judgment and gave it words. He said to Judas, "Leave her alone...You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me" (verse 8). Mysteriously, he noted that Mary had anointed him for his burial. This was a time for loving him before he dies.

We should love and serve the poor at all times. We should also be alert enough to love people who are near and dear to us while we still have the time. At every graveside people say, "I wish I had done more. I regret I did not take time. It is too late now to do what I could have done when that person was still alive." Jesus was saying that they still had him in their midst. They could not have guessed that a week later he would be in the grave.

Jesus understood Judas better than the rest of them. The others were unaware of the fatal character flaw in the man. Jesus could size up people very well. Given his perceptive ability and the close quarters in which he lived with Judas over several years, he could tell that Judas was a troubled man.

Judas loved money too much. As a skilled money manager, he husbanded the resources of the small apostolic community, but his talent was also his devil. He never grasped the spiritual nature of their mission and failed completely to appreciate who Jesus was and what he hoped to do. Within the week, he would sell Jesus for money and betray his trust. Jesus tried to save him right up to the end, but Judas would not yield to love and salvation.

Jesus restored the good humor to their little dinner party. The squall passed, though his words about being anointed for his burial left a small cloud of unease. They would know soon enough what he meant. As the camera of our minds withdraws from that friendly scene, the light of the sunset puts all the guests in shadow, framing only two bodies reclining at table: Lazarus, freshly risen from the dead, and Jesus, destined to be buried a week later. Like shadowy angels, Mary and Martha stand as sentinels. Real angels would take their place at Easter.

### **Palm Sunday: If Tongues Were Silent, The Rocks Would Sing (John 12:12-19)**

The next day, Sunday, Jesus mounted an ass and rode into Jerusalem. Crowds came forth from the city. Waving palm branches, they shouted, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, the king of Israel" (verse 13). They treated him as a rising political star who would rescue them from the control of the Roman government. They missed the significance of his choice of transportation, an ass, the sign of humility. The prophet Zechariah had pictured just such a scene of the messiah of peace and salvation coming to his people riding on a donkey (Zechariah 9:9).

Freely, Jesus proceeded toward his holy passion to consummate the mystery of our salvation. The Word had come down from heaven to raise us from the depths of sin. He marched to his destiny without flags and banners, without knives and swords, without a retinue of threatening followers, without the symbols of power people like to use to put others in awe and submission. Meekly, humbly, simply he rode an awkward animal to the site of his blessed passion. The deluded crowds supplied the pomp, the banners of palms, the shouts of glory. In their minds they hailed a political liberator. But today, we use their acclamations in every Eucharist. We give those words their true meaning by acclaiming Jesus as a spiritual savior.

Quietly, Jesus had entered the dark environment of our fallen world. The Word rejoiced that he could be humble for our sakes, become human and raise us up to a divine destiny. Christ's love for us never rested while he was on earth. Nor will his love cease in heaven where he strives to elevate our humanity to glory with him in heaven. On Palm Sunday he was not interested in the superficial glory heaped on him from other people. His only concern was to introduce them and us into the real glory – a union of absolute love and happiness with God. Human popularity is fickle. Divine popularity is eternal.

In our Christian imagination we can stand along the two mile road from Bethany to Jerusalem and see Jesus humbly riding an ass on his way to his holy passion. We see the people throwing their cloaks on the ground and waving palms. There is a certain thrill to it all, but also a dead end, a void. In a few hours the palms will wither. The songs of triumph will evaporate into the air and fall silent. People will hastily retrieve their cloaks and wrap them tightly around themselves to fend off the evening chill.

Jesus has given us something more substantial. He has cloaked us with baptism, the clothing of our salvation. In the imagery of the Bible, he has washed away the red stains of our sins and made us pure as white wool. He was not interested in being the conqueror of Rome, but the victor over sin and death. He has endowed us with that hope of victory. The very presence of our redeemed persons along the road of the march to the passion is our true palm branch. We – not the mere branches of a tree – are the palms he wants to see.

God so loved the world that he gave us Jesus. John's Palm Sunday narrative closes with prophetic words on the lips of the Pharisees, "Look, the whole world has gone after him" (verse 19).

### **The Greeks Wish To See Jesus (John 12:20-36)**

The religious leaders had fretted that the "whole world" was rallying to the side of Jesus. The first evidence of their comment was the appearance of some Greeks who came to Philip and asked him, "Sir, we would like to see Jesus" (verse 21). The prophets had foreseen that the messiah would be the light of all peoples. The temple area had a section reserved for non-Jews. It was the Court of the Gentiles. Most likely it was there that visiting Greeks approached Philip and made their earnest request. Christ's enemies wanted to kill him. The Greeks wanted to visit with him.

In Luke's gospel, the Magi, the wise men from the east came to his birthplace at Bethlehem. In John's gospel the Greeks, the wisdom seekers from the west came to his deathplace in Jerusalem. The Magi beheld the Word in the form of a baby. The Greeks were to see the Word in the form of a criminal. Divine Providence had given the Magi the sign of a star to guide them to Christ. Jesus gave the Greeks the sign of a grain of wheat that must die in order to become the sheaf of wheat.

Wisdom seekers today want the reason for everything. They look for logic to solve the mysteries of life. The Greeks in this gospel looked for a person. Only the total embodiment of mystery is able to reveal the ole of mystery in life. They wanted to experience a person, not just hear the musings of a disembodied brain. They did not seek a reason for everything. They sought an encounter with a person, Jesus, who would honor the hunger of their hearts with two splendid insights into the ultimate mystery he had come to witness.

Jesus shared two wisdom sayings with the wise men from the west. This was the beginning of the evangelization of nations. He modeled what he would tell his apostles and all of us to do. Preach the witness the Gospel of salvation.

One saying concerned the agricultural myself of a seed and the process whereby it flowers. He did more than give the Greeks a lesson in biology which can only record the visible changes, but never uncover the final mystery of death and life. A seed must be buried in the dearth, die and then rise to life as a sheaf of wheat. Jesus then applied the image to persons.

“Whoever loses his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life” (verse 25).

The humble agricultural mystery is a symbol of the cancellation of all possibilities, but in fact the very road to the greatest possibility of all, total love in an everlasting life with God. Christ’s redemptive death would make that possible.

God authored the book of nature that we might read about him in the wonders of creation. Hence the image of the grain of wheat. God also inspired the writing of revelation that we might read about him in the sacred Scriptures. Hence Christ’s other wisdom saying, which was a stirring announcement of his passion. “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified” (verse 23). Jesus used the word “hour” in a special manner. He did not refer to clock time, but to appropriate time. He was always thinking *of his return to his Father* through the cross, resurrection and ascension into heaven.

At Cana, Jesus had told Mary that this hour had not yet come. He was secure and safe throughout his Galilean ministry because his hour had not yet come. Now the hour has arrived. The prologue of this gospel stated that witnesses had seen the glory of the Word, experienced the glorious presence of divine Love. Where was this glory most strikingly seen? At the cross, when Jesus was lifted up to glory. That insight inspires the words of the hymn, “When I survey the wondrous cross, on which the Prince of Glory died.” Small wonder that the cross is the central image of Christianity.

The Fathers of the church brought the intensity of their faith to the scene of the cross. They interpreted the last sacred breath of Jesus as the first breath of the Spirit he would send. The text lent itself to this understanding: “And bowing his head, he handed over the spirit” (John 19:30). They observed with reverence the water and blood from his pierced side and wrote of them symbolizing baptism and the Eucharist. They were deeply moved by the testimony of faith from the soldier. “Truly, this man was the Son of God” (Mark 15:39). The centurion had seen his glory even at the cross. And so have countless millions ever since.

John does not record the reaction of the Greeks. That will be given later by the Greek speaking peoples in Corinth, Athens, Ephesus, Crete, and many other places evangelized by the apostolic missionaries. “Gentiles” everywhere will come to faith in Jesus, the light of nations.

The prospect of death, however, was not going to be any easier for Jesus than for the rest of us. His glory language did not obscure his natural resistance to death or the pain and humiliation that would attend it. He must not only conquer death, but also his survival instincts that abhor the possibility of dying. He seemed to experience a mood change and it was the shadow of death that caused it. “I am troubled now. Yet what should I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour?’” (verse 27). This was the kind of language he used in Gethsemane, a scene not described in John.

Just as at Gethsemane where he surrendered to his Father's will, so here in John he overcame the troubling prospect of death. He declared that it was for this purpose he had come, and he asked the Father to glorify his name. The listeners thought they heard thunder at that point when the Father's voice said from heaven, "I have glorified it and will glorify it again" (verse 28). In the Gethsemane narrative, an angel came and comforted him. In John, the Father gives his Son that blessed assurance.

#### **Faith and Unbelief (John 12:37-50)**

This passage concludes the first half of the gospel, a section some call the Book of Signs, the chronicle of those miracles intended to open people to the glory-presence of God and call them to faith in Christ. Many refused to believe in Jesus. Others had begun to believe, but human respect and fear prevented them from professing their faith openly. The seed of their faith would only grow after it was watered by the blood of Christ. Two of these men were Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, whom we will meet again after the crucifixion.

Next begins the Book of Glory, the narrative of the greatest of all Christ's signs – the sign of the cross.