

Lent 5 – April 3, 2022

John 12: 1-8

During the weeks of Lent, a certain tension begins to arise, even a sense of inevitability, as Jesus turns his eyes to Jerusalem and faces the prospect of confronting his opponents in the centre of their power.

Bethany, a few miles from Jerusalem, at this moment was the place where tension really became palpable. Jesus had decided to bring his friend Lazarus back from death to life. What should have been regarded with wonder and joy by all, became rather the trigger for his enemies to act. They knew Jesus was now a danger to the power and fragile peace of the religious and political elites. Jesus had to be eliminated.

But the warrant was also out for Lazarus – he was now a symbol of the danger Jesus could pose to Temple and Throne.

In 2017, I participated in a 40 day silent retreat at Loyola House in Guelph, Ontario. My spiritual guide was a friendly Jesuit priest, Eric, whom I saw for an hour each day. The first week of the retreat is dealing with our sin history – not pleasant. When the week was over we had a day to rest and even talk. I asked a fellow retreatant, a priest, how it went. He said the week was the longest month of his life. How time didn't fly!

Week three was the Passion of Christ and my Director first made me focus on the events at Bethany, the relationship with Martha and Mary, the raising of Lazarus and then our text this morning from John 12.

Eric asked me this question: "Did you ever notice that Lazarus never said a word in all this drama? When Jesus stopped by their home one time, Lazarus was just there. In today's passage, we are told, Lazarus was just there. Even when Lazarus was freed from the tomb, there is no record of any exclamation.

Could Lazarus have been intellectually or physically challenged? Was he mute?"

When Jesus wept over his friend Lazarus' death, he decided to risk all for a man who perhaps could not even speak. A silent witness indeed.

Now we are back at Bethany for a dinner party. It must have been huge – all the disciples and who knows how many hangers on? This time Martha was not scolded for being in the Kitchen working her magic.

And again, Mary was the one to sit near Jesus – but this time she did something extraordinary and extravagant. She took a rare and expensive perfumed ointment, and spread it upon Jesus' feet, then wiped Jesus' feet with her hair. Try to visualize it – sensuous, silent – then try to inhale the sweet perfume that filled the house.

We were given 5 senses and we spend most of our time with eyes and ears (some of us with glasses and hearing aids as well). We have not *touched* one another very much during Covid lockdowns – and if we had Covid we lost our sense of *taste and smell*.

Psychologists maintain that we should be more aware of this delicate sense. Our brain processes a lot of information from our sense of smell. We are on the alert for the danger of smoke or decay, even danger; we are teased into anticipation by the scent of an apple pie in the oven; of the early scents of Spring which translate into hope and anticipation.

When you go to the tropics, it is your nose that tells you 'Hey, this smells like fun!'"

Once I went on a monitoring visit to Church partners in Eastern Africa. On the way back I thought I should buy Linda a present. It was a time when perfume was still permissible, so at an airport I thought I would buy some. (There was no nard). I was at a Kiosk with this well-groomed woman, somewhat bored, who was applying dabs to by wrist and spraying fumes into the air. I was just a bit overwhelmed. In the midst of this miasma, I managed to spy a perfume box like ones I had seen advertised in many magazines. I asked the lady, 'What about the Givinchy?' She replied, "You mean the Gavaaaanchy!" I found out that the difference between my Givinchy and her Gavaaaancy was about \$75.

Hmm – where's the Avon Kiosk?

Mary's nard, from the root of a rare plant in India and Persia was an heirloom.

Jesus accepted it.

People were stunned, quiet – almost – until Judas made his political statement.

On an average Tuesday, say, when I am watching TV and endure 5 minutes of power-advertising for generally needless and frivolous products, I would applaud Judas.

But not today – and not just because he was thief or about to be a betrayer – he simply was beyond seeing the sacred being acted out before him.

As Christians, we watch Jesus who knows what is coming – not every detail – but knowing his decision to enter Jerusalem would be the final act. Why wasn't he pacing the floor, motivating people, planning or just wringing his hands? But here he is – calmly accepting this intimate act of devotion from Mary.

Can we say that in all the world that day, Mary was the only one, other than Jesus, who really knew what was happening, what this moment was about?

Or maybe there was another – Lazarus – he knew, he understood, but he did not speak.

Many of us suffer from wounds remembering times when we were too busy, too distracted, too uncomfortable to minister to someone in need, someone in crisis, or nearing death. Our minds went to tasks ahead and we would get around to the wounded, the suffering - maybe tomorrow – which was always a day too late.

We also live in a society where we are told to fear the future, to save our money, hoard our treasures, protect ourselves. So, *our nard*, in whatever currency we hold it, is tucked away until the proper time.

Maybe when poverty strikes . . .

But, as Jesus said, "The poor are always with us." This is not an excuse to ignore injustice, it just means that everyday there will be opportunity to help and serve the hurting and deprived and persecuted of this world.

The story of Mary, rather, tells us, there will be a moment – a Kairos moment – a moment of divine opportunity - when all calculations are irrelevant. There is a need – so meet it with love, **devotion** and sacrifice – to give whatever we have.

Jesus might have solved all the world's problems; formed an army and defeated the Romans. Chased the priests out of the temple. Instead, he used his power to bring back to life a man who probably could not even say 'Thank you!'

He relinquished his power to the judgment of Pilate, Herod and Caiaphas.

Who would minister to the One who was ready to die for love of us?

There is in our world the smell of hatred, war, want, depravity, and decay.

There is also the scent of creation's bounty: the flowers in bloom, the forests awake. There is the scent of our homes, the familiar aromas of kitchen and garden. We remember the scent of a newborn baby. The scent of a flower brings back a sweet memory.

Where does our deepest devotion lay?

We are invited to become aware – and at times to share - the sacred scent of the divine.

That awareness takes devotion, love and sacrifice.

May we, this day, this week, this season, do something beautiful for Jesus.