

“New Ears, New Understanding” – John 12:1-8 – Lent 5 – Mar 17, 2013

“Back off! Leave her alone – she’s the only one who understands what’s happening here.” With that simple statement Jesus declares the meaning of what has just happened in this strange yet familiar incident, the anointing of Jesus at Bethany. However, so that we can more fully understand what was happening we need to slow down, and look intently at the details of this episode, because John has painted a magnificent picture here in words with more hidden details than a Renaissance tapestry.

The first of these details give us the setting, which according to John was in Bethany. More specifically, to the home of Lazarus whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Now we nod, and say “oh yeah, Lazarus.” But stop right there, and let your imagination run free. Try to come out of listening-to-scripture mode, and get into watching high human drama mode – or watching soap opera mode if that helps you to get into this passionate human drama. It’s “six days before the Passover” – the pilgrims have already gathered in Jerusalem, the crowds have already been building, the shops are open late for purchases to be made before everything shuts down for the opening days. We’re on the edge of this excitement, barely 3 kilometers from the city, in the suburbs. We’re seeing a tableau set not just in any suburban home, this is the home of Lazarus, where a tight group of friends have gathered.

This is no ordinary gathering, either, for the host was dead and is now alive. Lazarus, called forth from the tomb by Jesus only days before, is alive and well and “taking nourishment” as the old expression goes. He’s at table with Jesus and the others, eating. This is no ghost, because ghosts don’t eat. Neither is he sick, for people don’t usually feast when they’re sick. Now pause for a moment ... can you imagine the conversation? Can you imagine the emotions around that table? Gratitude that Lazarus is alive. Awe at the incredible power displayed yet once more by their friend Jesus. And everyone avoiding the “elephant in the room” – the predictions made by Jesus that he himself would soon be killed.

But not everyone avoided the awkward subject, as we see Mary quietly disrupt the festivities with a highly unusual action. She takes some expensive perfume, anoints Jesus’ feet and wipes them with her hair. It’s a great pity that the symbolism of this act is largely lost on us, because we just don’t understand the symbols. Take the perfume, for example. The text tells us it is nard – not just nard, pure nard – a whole pound of it. It was a Roman pound, so about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a British pound, about a third of a kilo. We are also told it was costly – Judas was aghast at the ‘waste’ of this precious resource which was worth about a year’s salary for a labourer. As an economist I was fascinated to learn that nard comes from a plant grown in the Himalaya Mountains. Fascinated because immediately questions of transportation and trade came to my mind, as well as issues of processing since this was distilled or refined nard. Images flash across the imagination of caravans on the old Spice Road passing through what is now Afghanistan, bearing precious spices and ointments and gold.

Questions and challenges to old understandings bubble up as well. For example, set against all the stuff I learned in Sunday School about Jesus being a somewhat rough-and-ready tradesman is this gathering of obviously upper-middle-class friends. Never mind for the moment about whether or not Mary “wasted” the nard, the very fact that she had in her possession a pound of the stuff, and pure stuff at that, and that nobody apart from Judas – who was clearly concerned about how he could convert it to cash for his own use – nobody apart from Judas seems overly concerned at the use of or even the having of such an expensive item. Here is a young woman, barely into her thirties, with enough wealth to purchase some spices worth a year’s wages. This was clearly no uncouth gathering of peasants in a rude little shack in a wee farm village, but instead an elite gathering of well-heeled people in a modern upscale suburban home.

Another symbol that we miss because of lack of familiarity with nard is that the spice was commonly used in the embalming process in those days. Where we simply hear that an expensive spice is lathered onto Jesus' feet in a strange ritual by Mary, early Christians would know instantly that this was a rite performed on a dead body. Our attention is distracted by Judas' comment about the monetary value of the spice – a sentiment with which we are familiar – and we fail to catch the real meaning behind the symbolism. Mary is preparing Jesus' body for burial. Shocking!

Even more shocking, perhaps, is that early Christians – at least those familiar with the Hebrew scriptures – would also know the only other references to nard in the scriptures. Those references occur in the Song of Solomon, in some very racy contexts – material that needs a warning label due to the graphic nature of the content! As one source puts it, “In the Old Testament, nard is referred to in the Song of Songs, as a symbol of the intimate nature of the Bride's love. This is the point at which relations with her beloved are initiated. When the perfume of nard is named, the bride recognizes her beloved as such.” Symbolic allusions to an intimate relationship between Jesus and Mary would not be lost on the early readers of John's gospel the way it goes in one of our ears and out the other today.

The anointing itself is also interesting. Anointing with oil was also used to prepare the prince regent for coronation – being crowned – as king. That form of anointing was on the head, whereas Mary anointed Jesus' feet – another clear signal that she was performing a ritual of death and burial. Could she have guessed or known that she would not have the chance to properly prepare his body when the death actually came? It's possible, because we are told that Jesus not only told his disciples that he would be killed he described the nature of his coming death as well.

Now, can you begin to feel the drama in that room? Can you feel yourself being drawn into this elaborate tableau? Can you smell the food cooking, and the smoke from the many fires in the neighbourhood? Can you hear the laughter and conversation of friends around the table? Can you smell the garden? Can you smell the musky, earthy smell of the nard as Mary spreads it on Jesus' feet? Can you sense the tender, caring passion as she wipes his feet with her hair?

We are at a bit of a disadvantage, because we live in a different time and a vastly different culture. And yet, for all of our cultural distance, in some ways we are more able to understand the symbolism of this episode than those who were sitting in it. Jesus has to tell Judas what the meaning of that anointing was, but we already know. Because we have the full story, we are able to see the irony of this little vignette as a short period of calm before the storm, as a brief episode of normality before the waves of destiny would shake all their lives. We understand that the raising of Lazarus from the tomb by Jesus was not only an occasion for rejoicing with friends around the table but was also the event that directly led to Jesus' own death. That act of goodness and kindness was one of the very acts of divine power that prompted the anger, the hostility, the violence that led to the execution of Jesus. We know that just two miles up the road from this pastoral scene of friendship and honouring, other malevolent crowds are gathering to plot the death of this man in whom so many saw the goodness of God. We know that within a week events would come to a climax on a hill outside the city of Jerusalem, and so the anointing of Jesus by Mary takes on an even more poignant meaning for us.

But we are blessed also by knowing how the story continues beyond even those tragic moments, and perhaps that is part of the reason we are able to slough over this episode so easily. We know that just over a week later this same Mary, still trying to take care of the body of the Jesus she loved, would discover the empty tomb, would encounter Jesus risen from death, would proclaim to the disciples the good news, “he is risen!”

So, why is it important that we dig into this story so deeply, and probe the details so intently? My prayer is that with these insights you are able to hear this story differently, to hear it anew with

fresh ears. I hope that you can immerse yourself totally into the story, and be awed by the symbolism that drips from every line. If you can do that, if you can hear the symbolism of Mary's action for Jesus, then perhaps you can also hear the symbolism of Jesus' action for you. Jesus, who died and rose again, gathered around the table with his friends. Jesus, who conquered death for Lazarus, who conquered death for himself and for you and me, sealing our redemption in the new covenant with God with his body and his blood, sitting at table with his friends – with you, and me, and all who would listen, and believe, and respond.

If our understandings of this episode are changed, perhaps our responses can also be modified by our new insights. Jesus pointed out to his closest followers that Mary had her priorities in the right order. Perhaps we can hear in that a call to us to pause and to reflect upon our faithful priorities. Individually, or in community, are our priorities lined up in a way that would earn the same kind of forceful endorsement by Jesus? Sometimes rational and careful stewardship is appropriate; other times the cost is less important than the meaning of the action. There are no hard and fast rules, only a reassurance that the one who validated Mary's actions also validated our faith with his death and resurrection, and who will continue to help us be faithful unto God through the power of the Holy Spirit.