

What has John seen? – week 13

Anointing and glory

w/c 4 July 2021

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." (Luke 4:18-19)

Read John 12:1-11

John begins his account of the public ministry of Jesus with a wedding feast – John 2:1-11; here he bookends it here with another gathering, but one with more sombre overtones – and further meals are yet to come in this gospel, both with their own significance (John 13:2 and 21:13).

In first-century Palestine, such a banquet would probably involve ten or twelve at most (all men – it was not considered proper for women to be with men in such a way), reclining around a low table on which the food would be placed. Etiquette demanded that guests' feet be washed (by the host's servant) on arrival, together with a symbolic anointing of their head with oil.

For Mary to have unbound her hair in the presence of these men would have been most unseemly – something normally seen as a sign of loose morals.

We only encounter Mary of Bethany three times in the gospels. There is though a singular thread running through these episodes:

"...Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet" (Luke 10:39)

"When Mary reached the place ... she fell at his feet" (John 11:32)

"Then Mary ... anointed Jesus' feet" (John 12:3)

How should we reflect these three in our lives? We may also see a parallel with the washing of the disciples' feet by Jesus (John 13:5). What message does that act carry for us today?

Matthew and Mark both have the woman (not named in their accounts) pour the perfume on Jesus' head. The amount involved (a pint or half a litre depending on the translation) would though have provided more than enough for both. Matthew notes the indignation of 'the disciples' at this act of extravagance (Matthew 26:8). We must remember that this all happens in a society where signs of abject poverty would be encountered on a daily basis. When should we focus on the needs around us rather than our equivalent of a "pint of nard"?

Conversely, can we end up so circumspect in our Christianity that we lose touch with the sheer extravagance of someone like Mary? When do we show extravagance? Why?

Some have argued - I have read - that verse eight 'prohibits' the church from seeking to eradicate poverty – on the basis that if there are no poor then we have negated Jesus words here. How would you counter such an argument?

The writer to the Hebrews gives a different perspective on the types of sacrifice that God is looking for:

"Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise – the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. ¹⁶ And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased." (Hebrews 13:15-16)

How do we balance each of these in our lives today?