

Words for the way, pastoral notes during Pandemic – The Anointing

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Opening Prayer:

May the words which we hear and read, and upon which we meditate, speak to our hearts, our minds, and our souls. May God the Holy Spirit be with us here at this time and in this place. Amen

Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8

Perfume – O the wonderful scent

One of the many fascinating aspects for me in the Middle East was the strong emphasis on perfumes, fragrances, and incense. Culturally coming from our western European culture, perfumes were mainly the remit of women, men maybe a little Eau de Cologne or aftershave. Incense was reserved for high mass church services. Thus, fragrances were not too important in our western culture. However, in the middle east the fragrances are very important. When one visits a home in that culture often there will be a carefully selected incense burning in the Majilis Room a parlour like room where guests are welcome and entertained. The pleasant perfume being a sensory sign of welcome and hospitality. Men and women alike will carefully select fragrances which they will place on their skin to give a pleasant perfume. The raw materials, and the labour involved in making fragrances are often very expensive. It is the very expensive ones which will be kept for only the most special of occasions. At times special fragrances may have been given as gifts on a particular occasion. Remember that the wise men from the east came bearing gifts of frankincense and myrrh.¹ The expensive fragrances may have been given as a part of a bride's dowery, especially to use on the wedding night². A young woman may have kept a jar of fragrant ointment, for many years, however, if she did not marry, then possibility may have either sold the fragrance or repurpose the same.

The anointing custom

We, hence, come to our Gospel reading for today. I am sure that many of you will be familiar with the middle eastern custom of removing footwear prior to entering a home. One thing that I quickly learnt whilst serving in the middle east, was that the fine desert dust comes on the wind. This dust gets into and onto everything. A visitor to a home will remove their footwear, and the host will offer a bowl of water and towel to wash one's feet from the dust of the outside. It is both a courtesy and a comfort that a good host will furnish to a guest.

Jesus' feet are anointed

We are taken to the house at Bethany, where was the home of Jesus' friends, Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. We are reminded it was the same Lazarus whom Jesus raised from the dead. We are also

¹ Matthew 2:11

² Consider Ruth in Ruth 3:3 and Song of Songs 1:12-14

told that this was dinner to be held in Jesus' honour, we are but six days before the Passover. For those of you who are keen biblical scholars, you will note that there is a very similar account of possibly this same event in what we call the "Synoptic Gospels" of Matthew, Mark and Luke.³ I encourage you to read those three accounts, and reflect upon both the differences and similarities with the narrative from John's Gospel.

We are told that whilst Martha was serving, which is really shorthand that she [Martha] was dealing with the meal and all that went with hosting the same. Mary, Martha's and Lazarus' sister came with an expensive perfume. Expensive certainly, as Saint John records that it was pure 'nard.' We are told that the fragrance filled the house as Mary pours this perfume onto Jesus' feet. Mary then wipes Jesus' feet with her hair. One would have to think that is one very special devotion. But keep in mind that Jesus had raised their brother Lazarus from the dead. Mary had a special insight into who Jesus is, therefore, displays a humble devotion and love for Jesus.

What is Nard?

Let us examine the perfume of pure Nard, better known as 'Spike Nard.' Spike Nard is a class of aromatic, amber-coloured essential oil derived possibly from *Nardostachys jatamansi*, a flowering plant in the honeysuckle family, which grows in the Himalayas of Nepal, China, and India. I note that this essential oil online seems to retail for about \$100 for 5ml. Thus, even today this is one very expensive perfume. Note that the Scriptures tell us that Mary uses about a pint of this perfume!⁴ If my imperial to metric conversion is correct, then that would be about 500ml! So, at today's prices, a \$1000! The Scriptures tell us that the value was about year's wages.⁵

Extravagance?

The cost and the apparent extravagance drew out Judas Iscariot. Note that John quickly tells his readers that it would be he [Judas] who would betray Jesus.⁶ Judas' objection is superficially plausible, the contention is a utilitarian one which pits compassion (concern for the poor) against extravagant, unqualified devotion. We learn that Judas' seeming altruism is actually masking his own greed. John records that Judas was not only the keeper of the disciple's common purse but would help himself to funds therein.

Jesus placed a stop to Judas' grumblings about the apparent extravagance in Mary's devotion:

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."

There is the reality that the time for Jesus to suffer and die is close at hand. Did Mary have some insight into what Jesus was about to face? We do not know, however, Jesus himself gave the clue to those gathered there that night. The reference to the poor always among us is a quote from

³ Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; Luke 7:37-39

⁴ John 12:3

⁵ Ibid 12:5 (Greek, 300 denarii)

⁶ Ibid 12:4

Deuteronomy 15:11⁷, but Jesus is pointing out that the finality of his work and purpose are to be soon fulfilled.

For us on this Lenten journey

Our lives and time here on this earth are precious. We need to seek the Saviour whilst we are able. There may be times when what we value deeply in our human account is actually meant for a much higher purpose. What may seem wanton or wasteful is actually the highest devotion and love which may be given away to another. We need to really consider how we may bring the fragrance of Christ into other people's lives as his disciples. At this Lenten time let us seek to be truly humble disciples of Christ our Saviour.

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⁷ There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore, I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land.