

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Mary took a pound of costly ointment of pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment. (John 12:3)

And so it is that our sister Mary of Bethany leads the lament for the approaching death of our Lord. I guess she was always faster that way than many of us. I mean, when I think of approaching death, I think of practical matters. I have it as a signed addendum to my will, for example, that I want an inexpensive casket:

Being a frugal man and concerned for the welfare of my family, I request that I be buried in a plain pine box, like they used to bury cowboys in.

I'm hale and hearty and have no reason to fear death, but if I think about it, then I am inclined toward practicalities.

But when Mary thinks about death... thinks about Jesus hale and hearty and sitting there before her... she is inclined toward extravagance. It is the extravagance of love. It is the overflowing of gratitude.

I read recently that if the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church oppose the ordination of women, it *cannot* be because they have doubts about the worthiness of women. It must be for some other reason – not worthiness – because all the Church acknowledges that the most worthy follower of Jesus was his mother, Mary, and all the Church acknowledges that the Holy Women around Jesus put the men to shame. I am thinking of Mary Magdalene, for example, who is acclaimed as the “apostle to the apostles.” And I am thinking of Mary of Bethany, who knelt at the feet Jesus, anointed them with fragrant oil, and wiped his feet with her hair. She seems simply smarter and better than most of us.

Judas, of course, murmurs about Mary's extravagance. He worries about the practicalities. Even more than Mary, he has heard our Lord

speak of death, of being delivered into the hands of his enemies, of suffering and dying. Judas has heard these things, but thinks of the money box. But, Mary, bless her, thinks of our Lord's death and lavishes what she can upon the man.

In this morning's First Lesson, from Isaiah Chapter 43, the Lord speaks of a new thing – a thing so momentous it puts even the Exodus to pale. The thing about Mary of Bethany is that she is the one who seems to perceive this new thing. She perceives it in Jesus, and she adores him because of it.

Mary seems to understand something that not even the Twelve disciples seem to have understood: that this Jesus who sits with them at the table, young and good and healthy, is close to death. She has sat at his feet. She has considered his words. She seems to perceive something that no one else does perceive, and her insight drives her to extraordinary devotion.

I doubt that Jesus would have asked for the luxury Mary poured out on him, for he was a poor man, acquainted and content with rough and plain things. But he did not oppose this thing she did. He did not discourage the inclination of her heart toward him. And so he permits her to anoint his feet with the costly ointment and to wipe his feet with her hair. The fragrance of that gracious deed filled the house where they were.

The only thing that makes sense of what Mary did is that *you* would have done the same knowing now what she seems to have sensed back then: that this death of Jesus, which Mary foresaw, is a loving death meant to save you and me and the whole world. In face of such wondrous love, what is the cost of some ointment and what is the hardship on one's hair? The woman gave the best she could. It was a great kindness, and Jesus accepted it as such.

Judas, as we have said, begrudges her gift, but his motives are not pure. And in any case, money is well-spent that is spent on Jesus. Mary, you see, is not making arrangements for her own burial, but for the burial of Jesus, and she counts him as being worthy of her best.

It is the same impulse that guided our ancestors in the Lord to build this church we now enjoy. We could well stand in awe of that generation, many of them blue color immigrant workers, and of how they lavished their resources on our church. I tried to capture something of their devotion in a paragraph on “Paraments and Vestments” in my Wish List essay:

#### *Paraments and Vestments*

*The classical ideal concerning church art is that congregations should do the best they can! For a cathedral or a wealthy parish, that might mean gold and silver and the commissioning of fine artists and craftspeople to make the church furnishings. For a poor congregation, that might mean wood and wool, but nonetheless, it should be wood and wool lovingly crafted and maintained. In our church art and furnishings, we should strive for excellence and beauty, to lift the human spirit heavenward and to express our desire to offer our best to God.*

This thing Mary did: She spent lavishly on Jesus because she seems to have understood his approaching death, and understood that death to have been for the benefit of her and of you and me.

This is the Fifth Sunday in Lent. It is the last of the days when Jesus is a free man. It is the last days before he is a betrayed man. Mary invites us to pause and to take stock of the Holy Week soon upon us. Like her, we know what is soon to be befall Jesus. And like her, we are soon to fall on our knees before this same Jesus. She knelt to anoint his feet and to wipe them with her hair. We shall kneel before this same Jesus to receive his body and his blood – his divine pledge that his death was for you, for me.

We would have to be a stick or a stone to remain unmoved by the things of Holy Week. Long ago, the LORD swore that he would never forget us...that even if a mother should forget the child at her breast, still he will never forget us. Holy Week tells the story of that love than can never forget us, never let us go.

I urge you, then, to great earnestness in your piety this coming Holy Week. We have heard of Mary and of her devotion to Jesus. Let us be that woman, let us be Mary, for Jesus is well worthy of our devotion. To him belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.