

Holy Monday

Mthr Judith Brown

As we begin our journey through Holy Week, Christ is of course the figure who goes before us. He leads us in contemplation of his Passion and death. But along the way we meet all sorts of people, and watch them as they encounter Christ. Through their stories we see humanity in all its variety, capable of great love and courage, but also of hatred and violence. We see devotion and commitment, but also fear and betrayal. And of course in seeing these people – Peter, Judas, Pilate, as well as Mary of whom we read tonight – we see ourselves.

In John's gospel some of the stories of encounter with Jesus look deceptively simple, but they open up layers of meaning, and offer powerful symbols and evocative contrasts. Tonight we have the story of Jesus going to the house of his good friends in Bethany, where they have invited him and others to

celebrate the extraordinary events when Jesus called Lazarus out of the tomb, from death to life. What starts as a great celebration turns to something very different, as Mary behaves in an eccentric and even shocking way. She brings a jar of perfumed ointment and totally empties it out, anointing Jesus's feet, and then drying them with her hair. This was not normal polite womanly behaviour, certainly not in company; and the gift of the ointment – nard – was lavish and extravagant. The raw ingredients would have been imported from the Himalayas, and the value was almost what a labourer would have earned in a whole year. No wonder Judas growls and grumbles at the seeming waste of something so valuable.

Jesus himself gives the offering meaning: and here is one of the gospel writer's haunting contrasts. At a feast to celebrate life springing from the tomb, Jesus points to the anointing as the prelude to his own death. It is symbolic of the anointing of his own dead body according to Jewish burial rites. The scene is

being set for what follows, and prefigures the loving care which Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus will show for the body of the crucified Jesus. Death and Life are interwoven and inseparable in Him. His risen life for himself and those who love him can only come through his death and the defeat of sin and rebellion against God. Another contrast is the lavish generosity of Mary's love, an outpouring of devotion, compared with the grumbling meanness of Judas, and possibly his dishonesty in the care of the common purse. The writer suggests that there are choices to be made as people – and we ourselves – encounter Christ.

But the writer also makes this a sort of hinge passage between two distinctive parts of the gospel. The death and raising of Lazarus is the final episode in what is often called the Book of Signs, the account of Signs or Miracles which show us who Christ is. Now the author turns to write what is often called the Book of Glory – that intense portrayal of Christ's

journey to the cross and beyond, where God's glory manifested in Christ is shown to be the glory of outpouring love. Again there is a contrast – this is not the sort of glory with which worldly rulers surround themselves: it is not power, pomp and pageantry. It is self-giving love which is the very nature of God himself.

So what does this brief episode say to us? Many different things I expect. But perhaps Mary is an appropriate model as we start on Holy Week. She suggests that what the life-giving love of Christ calls from us is in our turn self-offering love. Many of you will know the famous Prayer of Abandonment written by the early 20th Century martyr in the north African desert, Charles de Foucauld. Its final lines are a good prayer for Holy Week as he takes up this theme of a necessary offering of ourselves, necessary because it is the only way we can truly respond to the love of God.

*Into your hands I commend my soul:
I offer it to you with all the love of my heart,
for I love you, Lord, and so need to give myself,
to surrender myself into your hands without reserve,
and with boundless confidence,
for you are my Father.*