

HOMILY PREACHED AT SJH LENT 5 2019

The evening before something major happens in our lives is a very precious time. It might be leaving home for the first time, or getting married, or joining the navy, or going into hospital for a serious operation. We might already have had a big party for lots of friends – a stag night or hen night, perhaps – but on the eve of the big event we probably want just a few people around, people to whom we are very close.

This is the setting for the occasion we've just read about. The day after the event in our gospel reading Jesus will enter Jerusalem on a donkey, as the prophet Zechariah had written of the Messiah-King of Israel. In less than a week he will be hanging on the cross. Mary, Martha and Lazarus, two sisters and a brother, are among Jesus' closest friends. He is staying with them at their home in Bethany, a village on the outskirts of Jerusalem. Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead a short while ago, and that has roused increased opposition from the religious and political establishment. They're worried about a popular movement getting out of hand, and fear the ruling Romans will clamp down on everyone.

So the final showdown which will lead to the cross is looming. Against this backdrop, at an evening meal, Mary (not Jesus' mother, not Mary Magdalene) anoints Jesus' feet with expensive ointment, and wipes them with her hair. It's rather strange, isn't it? Normally the head is anointed with oil or cream or perfume. The feet are washed with water, and dried with a towel. What do these departures from expected practice mean?

First, anointing carries connotations of kingship. The kings of Old Testament times were anointed. Kings and Queens of this country are anointed at their coronations by the Archbishop of Canterbury. When you set Jesus' anointing in Bethany alongside his entry on a donkey into Jerusalem the next day, there's a pretty strong emphasis on his being a king.

Next, why the feet? It reminds us of Jesus' own act a few days later of washing his disciples' feet at the last supper: an act of loving service for us all to follow. The picture being formed is of Jesus the Servant King. He gives an additional interpretation of the anointing: Mary has bought the perfume for the day of his burial. Her action anticipates the embalming of his body after his death. So the picture that is built up is of Jesus the Servant King, reigning from the cross.

What about wiping his feet with her hair? This is surely an act of love and personal devotion, of closeness to Jesus. Mary is contrasted with Martha and with Judas. Martha, with the best of intentions, was probably 'distracted with much serving', to use a phrase of S. Luke's. Judas suggested a better, more practical use for the money, though he had a hidden agenda. But Mary knew that God's love is freely given to people who don't deserve it, and she was responding in love.

In our lives, as we try to follow the Servant King reigning from the cross, it is our acts of love which best witness to God's love for us. We will begin most naturally amongst the people closest to us: our family, our close friends, the members of our church. Sometimes our love will be spontaneously expressed: we'll respond to the occasion and the person. But just as importantly love can be deliberate and sustained, as when we make a commitment to be involved in something helping others: visiting, helping at a night shelter, supporting a charity, writing to prisoners or whatever. Married love has to be deliberate and sustained, even if it began with how we were feeling towards someone. Christian love is an act of will, not emotion. We decide to love, and pray that God will give us the grace to carry it through. Love can be costly, but it cannot be hidden, and it will attract others to our community where they too can discover the love of Jesus, the Servant King reigning from the cross.