

Philippians 3:4b-14

John 12:1-8

I don't know if you've ever been at a family celebration when things suddenly became tense and fraught and a row ensued. People who write novels and screenplays and especially soap operas seem to like them, anger and bitterness bubbling to the surface, family members losing their tempers with each other and guest looking on in dismay at the collapse of the occasion.

For a dramatist of course such moments allow all sorts of useful points to be made. The plot can take a new turn. But they make me shudder. A shared meal ought to be a time of support and friendship, not of destruction and violence.

Part of the tragedy of this little scene is that Jesus badly needs and wants his followers to be united at this moment. The rest of the world is plotting against him; his friends might at least have the decency, you might imagine, to stick together and back him! But no, we can feel the tension crackling in the air.

There is the obvious confrontation between Judas and Mary. But even before that consider the simple words: "Martha servedthen Mary took a pound of perfume. We have met the sisters before – in the previous chapter and at the end of Luke 10. Every word written about them sits together. They are rounded characters. We feel we know them.

Martha, as in the incident in Luke, had made a great dinner for Jesus and his followers. Mary not to be outdone steals centre stage, not this time by simply sitting at Jesus' feet, but by her apparently outrageous gesture of anointing Jesus' feet and wiping them with her hair. She would need to let it down for this purpose; that's roughly equivalent, at a modern polite dinner party, of a woman hitching up a long skirt to the top of her thighs.

You can imagine the onlookers reaction. Had she no shame? What was she trying to say – to Jesus, to the onlookers? All sorts of disturbing thoughts must have been flying round the room. There is a particular tension in the air, after all the

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things that Jesus has said and done and the warnings of violence being plotted against him.

We can imagine in particular how Martha felt. She must have been pretty fed up

- Again Mary was not helping her
- Again Mary was the centre of attention

she must have thought Mary had gone well over the top this time; but it was Judas who came out and said it. The other disciples looked on – quite likely embarrassed by Mary's extravagance, by Judas's outburst and by Jesus's strange comment.

John is quite clear where the blame lies. Judas he says, had in any case been helping himself out of the common purse, so his reaction wasn't sincere. Jesus goes way beyond all this. What he says is difficult to translate, and John may well have known that what he's written doesn't make complete sense as it stands. That may be part of the point

What he says suggests that Mary had been keeping this expensive perfume to anoint his body after his death. In other words, she like Caiphas may be saying, by her actions, more than she knows. Her act of love is a prophetic statement about the fact that before too long Jesus is going to be buried – and buried so hurriedly that there may not be time for proper anointing, so he'd better have it right away.

On the other hand his words also suggest that Mary should now keep it – anything that's left of it – for the day of Jesus' burial; and that this purpose will be more important even than selling it to give it to the poor. Bethany means "House of the poor". This is an astonishing statement, granted Jesus' repeated statements about the importance of the poor and the kingdom-blessings that would come to them. The only explanation is that Jesus believed that his coming death would be the action through which the world as a whole, including the world of poverty and all that went with it, would be put to rights.

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But there is no escaping the challenge posed by the standoff between Mary and Judas. It is one of those scenes which positively shouts at the reader, "Where are you in this picture?" Are you with the shameless Mary, worshipping Jesus with everything she's got, risking the wrath of her sister who's again doing all the hard work, the anger of the men who perhaps don't quite trust their feelings when a woman lets her hair down in public, and the sneer of the person who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing

Are you with the cautious, reliable, prudent Judas? (as he must have seemed to most of them there), looking after the meagre resources of a group without steady or settled income, anxious to provide for their needs and still have something left to give to the poor? (This was a regular preoccupation. When Judas went out at the Last Supper (John 13:10) the others guessed that he might be going to give something to the poor, even at that solemn moment.) Put aside your natural inclination to distance yourself from Judas. After all, even at that last moment none of the other disciples had suspected him of treachery. Can you see just a glimpse of him as you look in the mirror?

Or are you back in the kitchen with Martha? If so how do you feel about both Mary and Judas? And what do you feel about Jesus and what he has just said?