**ST. JOHN’S AND ST. PAUL’S**

LENT V SERMON 6/4/25, JOHN 12: 1-8

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

This morning’s gospel reading is so dramatic that it is hard to know how to talk about it. The story is of a dinner party that takes place only a few days before the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. It’s a dinner party, the third time Jesus is shown as visiting his close friends in Bethany.

The first time he visited, Jesus defended Mary’s right to sit at Jesus’ feet, with the men, and listen to what Jesus had to say. That was a radical and daring thing for a lone, unmarried woman to do. Mary wanted to listen to Jesus too, and he had no problem with that. Unlike her sister who needed a hand in the kitchen, and unlike some of the men who thought a woman's place was at home. Jesus couldn’t see why a woman shouldn’t be allowed to listen to his teachings, and indeed he commended Mary, saying she had chosen the better part, and wasn’t to be deprived of it.

Jesus’ second recorded visit to his friends in Bethany was at the time he raised Lazarus from the dead - a foreshadowing of the Resurrection, when God demonstrates his power to restore life to people who have died. That time it was Mary’s sister Martha who recognized that Jesus was the Son of God.

Now this morning, the fifth Sunday of the season of Lent, we watch Jesus taking supper for the last time with his good friends in Bethany. Everyone is there, Jesus and the Twelve, Lazarus, who is living proof of Jesus’ divinity, Martha and Mary. The mood is sombre, because everyone knows that Jesus and his movement is attracting serious hostility from the Jewish authorities. But Mary is the only one at the supper party to recognize the truth of the warnings that Jesus had been giving, and the male disciples couldn’t seem to take in, that Jesus was soon to be arrested, tried, convicted and executed for his daring to speak truth to the corrupt and powerful.

Mary was so upset that she took a pound of spikenard ointment - I looked into that, spikenard is a small plant related to honeysuckle which grows in the Himalayas. The roots are used to make an ointment with a strong aroma, prized for medical and religious purposes, as well as a perfume. Spikenard was one of the perfumes used to anoint the dead, with the practical purpose of disguising the stink of a decomposingbody in a hot climate. A great deal of labour goes into the making of it, and it had to be carried by camel and donkey caravans along the Silk Road and other trading routes, sold to one merchant after another, each taking a profit, until it finally came into the hands of a family in Bethany. By this time it was worth tens of thousands of dollars in today’s money. That spikenard in its valuable alabaster container was probably the most precious thing in the house. And Mary took what would have been a substantial part of her dowry, and poured it over Jesus' feet. We know now that Jesus was to wash the feet of his disciples only a few days later. The washing of feet was the task of the lowliest slave in the household, everyone had dirty feet from the filthy streets, and wearing open sandals, slaves didn’t usually have sandals. Mary didn’t dither over her choice, because she, too, knew what was to happen, how humiliating and agonizing was the death Jesus had to go through, and she humbled herself to perform a foot washing. Using her own hair to wipe Jesus’ feet shows the depth of her emotion. In those days, to see a woman’s hair shows how private and intimate the situation was. I think that probably everyone was weeping.

Except the traitor Judas of course. That thief tried to shame Mary, saying that the money she spent would have been better given to the poor. But Jesus told Judas to leave her alone, saying that Mary had got the ointment to prepare for the day of his burial. The woman Mary who had been allowed to listen to Jesus speaking to his disciples was also to be allowed to express her emotions.

As a woman, I find this supremely comforting. That Jesus, so close to the end of his life, and knowing ahead of time the extreme cruelty of his final moments, and naturally quite preoccupied, still could find it in his heart to say such a radical thing about a woman, that she had a right to listen and learn, and a right to express herself, and by extension that all people, male or female, rich or poor, all of us are to be allowed to listen to Jesus and draw ourselves closer to God: well, this is wondrously Good News!

I know we are in the later part of Lent; Easter is the Sunday after next, and we are, rightly, called upon to repent our sins. After all, it was our sins and the way our sinfulness got in the way of our path to finding happiness in the presence of God that caused God to send us his only Son in the first place.

That said, I still find a lot of comfort in this morning’s readings. Thanks to Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross, we are being given a fresh start on our journey to eternal life. All of us, the poor and oppressed, the rich and powerful - IF they can bear to part with material things and realize that spiritual things are far more important - old and young, male and female: all of us are given the new beginning Jesus offers us.

As we go through the gloom of sorrow and repentance, we ought to realize how lucky, how blessed we are: God loves us, Jesus saves us, the Holy Spirit is with us at this very moment.

Amen, I say amen!