

Engaging the Reality of God 5: Jesus anointed at Bethany

April 2019 - Lent 5

John 12:1-8

1 Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 2 There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. 3 Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. 4 But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 5 "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" 6 (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) 7 Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. 8 You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Message

Mary's Extravagance
and

Meeting the reality of God - Part 5

Introduction:

Several years ago Kris Pol brought a personal reflection from her study of Mary and Martha as they appear in the gospels and particularly in Luke 10. Kris looked at the different women in the home and explored their differences that led to the moment where Martha complained to Jesus that Mary was sitting around enjoying what he was saying in a living space while she was preparing the meal in the kitchen. Kris did such a good job of this that whenever I think of Mary and Martha I think of her!

Mary and Martha provide a rich study in personality. I'll spend some time looking at them and then suggest something Mary models that has helped me have appointments with God that I cherish. So this is Part 5 in the series 'Engaging the Reality of God'.

As we meet them, Mary and Martha divide cleanly along some personality lines that are well recognized today.

Mary is relational. She is a 'people person'.

Mary is very aware of who is in the room and what is happening in the room - now.

Martha seems more task orientated. At any one time she is aware of what need to be done by when. She may see people in the present but her head is full of what lies ahead waiting to be done. Life in the kitchen anticipates hungry people at the table.

Mary relates to people because that's what we do in life. Life is about relating which is interrupted by tasks!

Meanwhile Martha sees that as a luxury and relates to people because we need to get things done.

Don't rush to conclude one is emotional and the other rational or even unemotional. That's another issue.

This goes right down to how we hold our selves and what we do with our selves.

Are we here to relate and do what is required to sustain that relating or do we relate to get things done? Can we meet without an agenda or must there be an agenda if we are meet?

Where might you be on this?

Mary and Martha represent both individual personalities but also the personalities of cultures among us here. You know who you are but some of us come here to meet and the event starts when we meet while others come at a given time to meet and the meeting starts at that time.

I suggest there is an underlying dynamic to note here.

Some of us are primary and others secondary in our functioning.

As a secondary functioning person myself the way I experience this is that everything is clear after a night's sleep and a coffee. I register things in the moment but need time to connect the dots and decide what was what. That can involve reflection in prayer: "Lord, what was that?" or "What happened there?" I need some space to process.

I admire people who can do all that in the moment 'on the fly'. They are primary functioners and live in synch with the moment. They know what they think and feel as things move around them. They may not always be right but they are never lost for words.

Some of us can hear our intuition in the moment and others need to think through the realities point by point – which takes time.

In Eindhoven we live in a setting that requires conscious structured thinking and gives time for that. It's the only way to run high technology. You do not run industrial processes let alone a nuclear powerplant on intuition!

So we live in a highly task/process-orientated environment.

Mary is the primary functioning person. She intuits the moment and engages it with passion. That is a wonderful freedom for her and sometimes a recipe for chaos.

Martha parks the present reality to anticipate the immediate future and to do what must be done.

So we read in Luke 10:40 we read about Jesus' previous visit to Mary, Martha and Lazarus:



⁴⁰ ... Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.' ⁴¹ But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; ⁴² there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.'

That would seem to be Jesus favouring the intuitive-primary relational person over the sober responsible structured task-orientated person - at least in this instance?¹

Today's Text

Now we turn to today's encounter with Mary at Bethany.

Much has happened since the kitchen dispute with Martha. Her brother Lazarus died, was buried and called back to life. That was a very intense experience for all concerned including her good friend Jesus.

Because of this -at least in part- the authorities had decided Jesus was too much. It's a real game changer when someone not on your team is raising people from the dead! So if Jesus were to come

¹ This may also have been concluded from the Waiting Father and his two sons story heard last week?

to Jerusalem he would risk being taken out in some way.

So we see how Jesus' mission has been growing in intensity and John the Evangelists lets us know it is now six days until the Passover in Jerusalem. In this frame Jesus comes to dinner again.

Coming to dinner as a guest in Jesus' day involved a few kind gestures from the host.

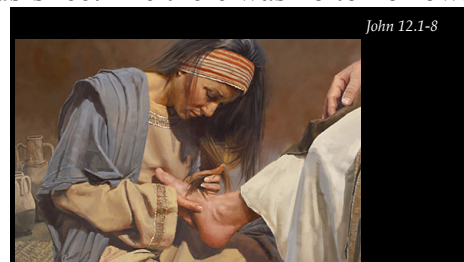
In Jesus' day you could expect some water to wash your tired dusty feet.

You could also expect a dab of perfume to make you feel better and cover the likely body odour that came with life in the heat.

Something moves Mary that to take these customs to the whole new level.

Something leads her to take the costly jar of nard and wash Jesus's feet like there was no tomorrow.

Jesus was getting a foot treatment that kings could not dream of. The warmth of his feet caused the fragrance to waft through the whole house. His presence was impossible to avoid.



The only time people had their feet anointed in this measure was in preparation for burial.

In a week's time Jesus would be on his way to the cross and soon after being prepared for a hasty burial. Everyone remembered that Mary had anticipated this in Bethany.

Extra to this Mary did something that was really over the top! She let down her hair and wiped his feet with it. This was very intimate.

Again there is a reaction to Mary's attention to Jesus and this time it comes from Judas.

Judas voices the politically correct, sensible, sober voice of critique. What a waste!

“Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?”

Even without knowing that Judas dipped into the common purse he had a structured view of finances and knew the relative value of things. Mary was seemingly oblivious but she was aware of something else. Jesus was worth it.

Application

A reason can always be given for not doing the best thing. The mind can be a bully and easily overrule the heart so reasons need to be weighed and tested.

Jesus was aware of the frame in which this was happening. He knew where it was all going. Mary did not know but something moved her in the right direction. I could imagine him saying to her: “Mary trust your instincts, they are good, very good.”

To shut Judas down,

7 Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.

8 You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

The point I want to offer here by way of application is the last phrase of Jesus:

“You do not always have me.”

If you want to meet the reality of God, you need to respond when he is near.

Mary illustrates this beautifully.

Something told her that Jesus' presence among them was special, significant and precious.

That was the time to pour out her all to him.

That was the time to devote herself as never before.

She was right.

The wider concerns were not as important as the presence of Jesus with her there and then.

A verse from Isaiah 55:6 that I spoke to a few weeks back speaks into this again:

Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near;

In other words, when something tells you God is close, drop what you are doing and seek him.

Illustration

I'll share an early experience of this:

On a bright winter's afternoon in 1984 I was working alone on our house renovation lining walls. Saturday was the one full day I had each week to do this work. As I was working I had a sense of God's presence. It's an atmosphere, a sense of being drawn. It's a sense of not being alone. It was quiet. I decided to sit down in an old sofa chair and pray. It became a deep meeting with the Lord. I know it was God and I knew I had done the right thing. God was near and invited my devotion to meet with me.

With hindsight I could have thought, Not now! I need to finish this while the light shines. Or hold that thought until I have time later tonight or tomorrow in church.

Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near;

My recommendation is, when the Lord calls, stay with him.

Forget about the mind saying: "No, you need to achieve A, B & C before you can pray."

Or when this comes in a church service, focus on God's presence, forget about the service happening around you or the people near by.

Then comes the richness of devotion. If God draws near, give your all.

If the Lord wakes you up at 3:00 a.m. and draws you to pray, do so. Yes, its disruptive but I can say, a 3:00 a.m. wake up for prayer can be life changing.

This is different from deciding yourself to pray at 3:00 a.m. and expecting God to be there. The best appointments are the one's God makes by his Holy Spirit.

This is what the boy Samuel experienced even though he did not know exactly who it was calling him. Eli's advice to him was to attend this this saying: "Lord, I am your listening servant." and wait.

This all involves allowing ourselves to be a bit more like Mary in her immediate responses to the presence of the Lord and less like Martha fitting the Lord into our schedule.

Expect the Holy Spirit to call you to him and remember,

Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near;

