

# SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

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*Fifth Avenue · New York City*

**Monday, April 3, 2023**

Holy Monday

**Solemn Eucharist**

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Elaine Farmer

*on*

Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 36:5-11; Hebrews 9:11-15; John 12:1-11

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## **Touching the Mystery A Sermon Series for Holy Week 2023 The Beauty of Holiness**

Yesterday we saw Jesus enter Jerusalem with his little band of followers and watched the crowds greet him. We wondered to which group we belong. With the rowdy crowd busy with the world and its power? Or with Jesus and his passion for the kingdom of God and holy humility? Which would it be? We probably all secretly hedged our bets about that choice but now our attention is drawn away from crowds, among whom we can choose to hide, to individuals — and we're on our own. We find ourselves today, on our Holy Week journey, in Bethany, a little village outside Jerusalem. In a small house, a private place away from noise and bustle and the thronging big city crowds. Here we come face to face with two characters in this week's tale of passion and tragedy. One — Mary — we're supposed to emulate but usually don't. The other — Judas — we're not supposed to emulate but — sadly — perhaps we do.

The occasion? A dinner party in honour of Jesus, and one of the guests is causing a stir. Like all hosts, Lazarus had hoped for no untoward incidents during the evening. Certainly that none of the guests would do something outlandish and bizarre. Poor Lazarus. It just isn't his night, I'm afraid. One of his guests, Mary, *[has taken] a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house [is] filled with the fragrance of the perfume.*<sup>1</sup> The fragrance is no bad thing but such extravagant behaviour is rather embarrassing and might disrupt the evening, even upset his guest of honour.

It certainly upsets Judas. But not Jesus. As Mary lavishes perfume upon him, so he lavishes praise upon her. 'Wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world,' Mark says Jesus told the other dinner guests, 'what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.'<sup>2</sup> Such an extravagant compliment! Why does she deserve this response from Jesus?

Mary had probably travelled among the disciples accompanying Jesus *on the way*,<sup>3</sup> through Galilee towards Jerusalem. She would have heard Jesus' prophecies of his death. But, whereas the disciples didn't seem to get the message, she did. She understood that when Jesus spoke of *the way* he meant more than a physical journey. He meant a *spiritual* journey to God. Unlike the disciples, she didn't reject Jesus' words, or the horror of his prophecy about his dying. She understood very clearly what Jesus meant when he said, 'I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me ... And I lay down my life for the sheep.'<sup>4</sup> This Mary heard; this Mary believed.

It is a very different matter when we come to Judas and we need to spend a little time with him today. He's the betrayer whom history and tradition have deemed the irredeemable villain. The one we are supposed to

despise but whose shadow exists in each of us. Why did Judas betray Jesus? For money? For political power? Because he wanted Jesus to lead an armed rebellion against Rome? Or was he a thief? All possible reasons. John's three verses about Judas in today's passage are the most detailed description of him in the whole New Testament but three verses aren't a lot to go on.<sup>5</sup> John claims Jesus knew all along that Judas would betray him but he still included the man in his inner circle. *'Did I not choose you, the twelve? Yet one of you is a devil,'* Jesus said, and John claims *'he was speaking of Judas son of Simon Iscariot, for he, though one of the twelve, was going to betray him.'*<sup>6</sup>

So this man was Jesus' *own familiar friend ... in whom Jesus had trusted, who ate of his bread ...* but this man *lifted his heel against Jesus*, to borrow the psalmist's words.<sup>7</sup> He'd travelled with Jesus, eaten with him, chatted round campfires with him about love and the kingdom of God, managed the money for him, gone with him to that wedding in Cana<sup>8</sup>. In a few days, Jesus, in that evocative gesture of love and service, will wash Judas's feet in that upper room. Judas will receive the bread and wine of that first eucharist from Jesus' hands.<sup>9</sup>

Judas was the ultimate insider, not some dismissible blow-in, some marginal outsider. But in Bethany, among his friends, we heard him heap scorn and derision upon Mary and her gesture of love. Mary's perfume was made from nard imported all the way from the mountains of Himalaya and cost almost as much as a labourer would earn in a whole year. "Why wasn't this sold and the money given to the poor?" Judas demanded. Despite John's view, and that of tradition, I don't think this makes him sound evil, just pompous and officious.

Be that as it may, Judas got short shrift from Jesus that day. *"Leave her alone,"* he said and we were left knowing that any act of service done out of love for another, no matter how extravagant, is an act on behalf of God. That dinner party in Bethany was fragrant with importance. It's one of only five events in Jesus' life that are recorded in all four gospels.<sup>10</sup> The others, by the way, are his baptism, the feeding of the five thousand, the cleansing of the Temple and the story of his passion.

Mary's anointing Jesus was in the tradition of their scriptures which told how prophets poured oil over the head of kings, anointing them as 'messiahs' to rule over the land. You'll remember, for example, the charming description of the anointing of King David. Instructed by Yahweh, Samuel sent for David. *He was ruddy*, the Bible tells us, *and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The Lord said [to Samuel], "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one". Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward.*<sup>11</sup> Just so did this woman, Mary, anoint Jesus, deeming him 'messiah', *'the one'*, anointing him to rule. Hers was an act of utter faithfulness. She knew nothing of the empty tomb. She simply heard Jesus speak, and believed — and anointed him to rule — and to die.

It was an act of service foreshadowing his burial when his dead body would be washed and anointed for the grave. Perhaps that's why John bothered to include that lovely little detail about *the house [being] filled with the fragrance of the perfume*. Here John was harking back to that other day they all remembered when Jesus brought the dead Lazarus to life and out of his tomb. Then they had known the stink of death. Now John implies that the sweet fragrance of Mary's perfume underscores the goodness of her devoted service — death, and its stink, is overcome.

Mary's gesture was also an act of love foreshadowing the foot-washing. She demonstrated her love for Jesus by anointing him. Jesus would demonstrate his love for the disciples by washing their feet — including Judas'. Intuitively, Mary seems to have understood Jesus' kind of leadership and ministry — the paradoxical upside-down, back-to-front business of service, of modelling oneself on those the world rendered powerless: children, servants, women, slaves. Standing in solidarity with them. So Mary becomes the model Christian leader and the model disciple, the one we are to emulate by placing the needs of others before our own dignity. Mary knelt before Jesus. Jesus knelt before his disciples. We are to do the same.

If Mary understood Jesus' kind of leadership and ministry, Judas didn't. Doubtless he loved Jesus but it seems it was love on his own terms. Whatever else drove Judas, the cost for him of loving will also be his life but there will no dignity in Judas' dying. Only ignominy and the darkness of utter condemnation. If the light of God shone in Judas' heart, the poor man could not feel its warmth. It seems Judas couldn't grasp that love was at the core of everything Jesus was about, hence Judas' death, while he might have thought it would atone for his sin — his betrayal — it would not be about redemption. Judas will die this Good Friday, unredeemed, unsaved from himself, never to know the power of forgiveness.

But Friday and the dying are not yet. For the moment, we still watch the milling crowds in Jerusalem, memories of that dinner party in Bethany, Mary's anointing of Jesus and his insistent message of love and holiness, still clear in our minds. We crane our necks to peer over the heads in front of us, to see Jesus on his donkey, his little band of followers straggling behind him, as they make their way through the city. We're not the only watchers. Roman soldiers, the sun glinting on their breastplates and spears, their banners fluttering in the breeze, are keeping their eyes closely on the people and this strange peasant preacher from Galilee. They can sniff hatred of Rome on the air and will spot the slightest sign of rebellion. One shouted word against Rome, one gesture of resistance, or defiance, and the might of Rome will crush these people without mercy.

Mary of Bethany walks by with Jesus' rather pathetic little band. Judas, too. We watch to see if Judas will turn aside but he doesn't. Betrayal is still just a thought. Evil and virtue still struggle within him. And within us. Shall we be loyal servants like Mary? Or failed disciples like Judas is about to become? Or shall we just stay safely in the shadows of the houses, wondering about the fickleness of our souls? Jesus turns as he passes, and his eyes rest on us in the shadows. Questioningly. As if he senses the doubts clouding our minds. Knows we are attracted by talk of his gifts of love and compassion, but not too sure about his talk of humility. Knows how strongly we feel the pull of the world's charms as it sings to us of its gifts.

We will remember Jesus' eyes as we follow him through this Holy Week. And their challenge. Jesus and Mary? Or Judas and the world? "Just what do you want?" they ask. Jesus waits for an answer. What will we do?

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<sup>1</sup> John 12:3.

<sup>2</sup> Mark 14:9.

<sup>3</sup> The ones recorded by Mark, Matthew and Luke.

<sup>4</sup> John 10:13-15 & 30

<sup>5</sup> John 12:4-6

<sup>6</sup> John 6:70-71

<sup>7</sup> Psalm 41:9 paraphrased

<sup>8</sup> John 2:1-11. Judas is not specifically named in this passage but Verse 2 states that Jesus *and his disciples* had been invited. It is a reasonable assumption that Judas was among the group who attended.

<sup>9</sup> Mark 14:17-26; Matthew 26:20-28; Luke 22:14-23;

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; Luke 7:36-50; John 12:1-11

<sup>11</sup> 1 Samuel 16:12-13