

Beginning of Passiontide John 12:1–8

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^b 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."

Loving God, we gather in Your name, and we invite Your Divine presence into this space. Bless our time of worship and learning. In Your holy name, we pray. Amen.

Today marks the beginning of Passiontide, the last two weeks of Lent, celebrated as Passion Sunday. It commemorates the suffering of Christ (Latin *passio* = "suffering").

We have a short but powerful gospel reading. John tells us that 'Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. **2** There they gave a dinner for him...and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him.'

Revealingly, but not surprisingly, the text suggests it is the women who do the work of hosting. John mentions the two sisters Martha and Mary in just two sentences.

We are told that:

→ Martha **served** and...

→ Mary **took** a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, **anointed** Jesus' feet, and **wiped** them with her hair.

Let us explore what kind of Passiontide ministry or Passiontide spirituality these two women are embodying and offering us. The text suggests a ...

- 1. Spirituality of Serving**
- 2. Spirituality of Silence**
- 3. Spirituality of the Sacrament of the present moment**
- 4. Spirituality of Sensuality, of Soft-skinnedness and of sweet and pleasant scentedness**
- 5. Spirituality of Sharing the knowledge of Jesus' impending death, thus a Spirituality of Solidarity**
- 6. Spirituality of Suffering**
- 7. Spirituality of Survival**

Spirituality of Serving

Martha served. Two words that suggest a whole array of tasks... Martha will very likely have bought the ingredients, Martha will have cleaned the house and prepared the meal prior the guests' arrival; Martha will share out the food at table; Later Martha will wash the dishes, tidy the kitchen, wipe the floors.

I'm afraid this is the reality of millions of women across the world, and many of these women also work outside the house.

Years ago, my family hosted a female priest Revd Grace from the Anglican Diocese of Mount Kenya South. She had come to Wakefield Diocese with about 5-6 male priestly colleagues. We joined in some of their gatherings, and every time her male colleagues expected her to fulfil all the tasks associated to hosting

and kitchen duties. She later shared her anger at this patriarchal expectation with me.

Some years later, we visited and worked for a while for the Diocese of Mount Kenya South. And we realised that our friend Revd Grace had two churches compared to her male colleagues who mostly had one.

Martha served.

Spirituality of Silence

The only two people whose words the gospel writer has preserved are those of Judas and of Jesus, two men. This is sadly not unusual. For example in the gospel reading for Candlemas at the beginning of February we are introduced to Simeon and Anna, two elders witnessing Jesus being brought to the temple for his

presentation. Anna is the only woman in the NT who has the title of a prophetess, and yet only Simeon's words are recorded and have become so familiar as part of the *Nunc Dimittis*: 'Now, Lord, you let your servant go in peace: your word has been fulfilled...'

Mary and Martha are also both presented as speechless; nevertheless their deeds enveloped by a spirituality of silence are powerful. Methodist minister Barbara Glasson writes: 'there is the silence of deep attention, when all we can do is 'be there'.¹

Mary was there. She took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. Mary embodied the silence of deep attention, Mary was there.

¹ A Spirituality of Survival, p. 12.

Spirituality of the Sacrament of the present moment

By being there in that moment, Mary also embodied the 'Sacrament of the present moment'. Dr David Hay whilst Reader in Spiritual Education at Nottingham University and researching on children's spirituality distinguishes between *line mode* and *point mode*: line mode refers to the continuum of past, present and future, and point mode refers to the present moment, the here and now.²

The only moment that is real and alive and available to us is this very moment now, and children if allowed to be themselves are brilliant at living in the present moment; and Mary also powerfully embodies this skill.

² Hay, D. and Nye, R. (2006) *The Spirit of the Child*. Revised Edition. London: Harper Collins Religions, p.66f.

And Jesus praises her for it. He says: 'you do not always have me', suggesting that he is there right now, and Mary seizes that moment... she seizes that moment through her...

Spirituality of Sensuality, of Soft-skinnedness and of sweet and pleasant scentedness

What Mary displays there, is a deeply sensual act. Her whole being, her whole body is involved in it. With her soft-skinned hands she is anointing Jesus' feet and with her soft hair she is then wiping the excess nard off, filling the room with a sweet and pleasant scentedness. We are told that the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

Interestingly, or rather sadly, before the priesting of women, across the centuries women were not allowed to anoint the sick and the dying (something only a priest was allowed to do). And yet here, Jesus is telling us that Mary is doing just that, anointing him who is about to die.

One of my patients in hospital was a beautiful little girl who would have turned three in May but who sadly died exactly two months ago. She had a very rare condition, and her parents were told by the doctors about one and a half years ago that there is nothing more that can be done for her except palliative care, and no one knew whether she had weeks or months to live. Her parents wanted her to die at home, so when I could I visited them.

On one of my visits, the massage therapist from Rainbows Children's Hospice was there massaging the little girl's poorly precious little body. The whole room was filled with the sweet scent of the oil and the gentleness of the female staff member's hands and voice. Mum who was also there, in her anticipatory grieving was deeply comforted by this sensual, soft-skinned act of service.

Spirituality of Sharing the knowledge of Jesus' impending death, thus a Spirituality of Solidarity

Jesus said to Judas and those present, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial." This means that Mary knew that he was going to die, so she shared the knowledge of Jesus' impending

death, thus displaying/embodying a spirituality of solidarity.

Spirituality of Suffering

Later in his gospel, John tells us that there were three Marys at the crucifixion (Mary the Mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene and Mary of Clopas – John 19:25), but he does not name Martha, which does not necessarily mean that she was not present too.

So these women embody a spirituality of suffering: they don't shy away from being present at the most horrendous of deaths, at the foot of the cross.

Barbara Glasson writes: Maybe there is no deeper silence in the history of the world than that of Easter Saturday; the tomb is sealed, there are no more

choices, and there are no more words. People who have experienced abuse throughout the world will know of this silencing, a place where God is so silent that they sense they are in a place of ultimate desolation.

And yet also, in the place where the silenced and the silence meet, there is embodied, through Jesus, [but also through the women at the cross and at the tomb] an eternal solidarity. Jesus descended into hell, into our hell, into the endless silence. The Word died and was silent so that the silent can give birth to words. Where the silences meet there begins the labour of new life. In the dark heart of the tomb a different story is being born...and, like all labours, it is a painful process.³ A spirituality of solidarity in suffering.

³ A Spirituality of Survival, p.16.

Spirituality of Survival

We don't know what happened to Martha and Mary after the resurrection. It's interesting to note that Mary of Clopas is often taken to mean Mary, wife of Clopas, whose relics are said to be in France, the same area that Martha, Mary and Lazarus are traditionally said to have been missionaries in after Christ ascended into heaven.⁴

But what does it mean to survive? There is now extensive research on trauma and theology re-envisaged through the lens of trauma. And there is no doubt that Jesus' crucifixion was an unimaginable traumatic event.

Trauma-informed theologian Karen O'Donnell considers the following necessary aspects of remaking oneself after traumatic experiences:

- 1) The particular experience that caused the trauma is no longer physically present in one's life, even though it continues to be present in one's body.
- 2) Attending to one's body in the aftermath of trauma.
- 3) Constructing a narrative about the experience of trauma that allows meaning-making and hopefully eventually promotes flourishing.
- 4) This narrative needs to be witnessed, to be heard and believed by another.

So connectedness and community are crucial for survival – we absolutely cannot do it on our own. Those must have been the circumstances for these women to survive and keep the gospel message alive and pass the gospel message on.

⁴ <https://anglicanfocus.org.au/2022/07/27/mary-and-martha-of-bethany/>

My dear brothers and sisters, we, you and I have no small task! You and I, we are, if you like, the Marys and Marthas of today, witnesses to Jesus' crucifixion, death and resurrection. We cannot fulfil this role individually but only together in community. There lies our strength and our resilience. Amen.

1591