

Love as an orientation: The story of the anointing of Jesus with oil

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Isaiah 43.16-21; John 12.1-8

The story of the anointing of Jesus by a woman during supper at a house in Bethany may seem familiar if you are any regular church-goer. The Gospels in fact offer four accounts of what is thought by many but not all to be the one event. How does John's account differ from the others? Well, John gives the woman a name, Mary, Martha's sister. Matthew, Mark and Luke don't name her. John does not note what only Luke notes, that she was 'a sinner' – almost universally taken to mean, in this context, that she was a sexual sinner, a slapper, possibly a woman who sold sex. It is interesting, don't you think, that of the four accounts only one throws in this descriptive hint, yet it is the description which sticks.

As we reach the start of Passiontide, and begin to pick up speed as we approach Holy Week, let's consider what the story might throw our way as useful material to contemplate.

What is often said is that it is a story about real generosity. Mary/the unnamed woman gets hold of a perfume that would have cost the equivalent of a year's wages. We can put that in modern perspective. In the UK, as at April 2012, the average earnings for full time workers was £26,500. That is certainly a generous sum for spending on perfumed ointment. Though we should adjust that figure somewhat because of a factor that Mary/the unnamed woman

would have understood from experience but may have hoped might be remedied two millennia later, that of gender discrimination. That average I just gave you is the average of two averages, and took account of a gender pay-gap which whilst narrowing here in the UK remains a fact. In that year, men earned an average of £28,700 and woman an average of £23,100. But this is to start taking and interpreting these four stories literally, which nearly always leads us up a dead end.

I have never been persuaded that a key message to this story is that of generosity. Or by the suggestion favoured by those right-of centre commentators who take Jesus' remark about always having the 'poor with you' as reason not to fight against poverty and material inequality, which, unlike the gender pay gap in the UK, gets only worse in relative terms.

John notes something the other Gospels do not: that the scent of the perfume filled the house. A touching detail. Matthew has the woman anointing Jesus' head. So does Mark. For Luke and John it is his feet.

And these same two go on to speak of her using her hair to wipe his feet. I used to find that aspect both unsettling and moving. Now, only moving. The unsettling bit must have arisen from what the 'helping professions' like

to refer to as inappropriate behaviour – usually referring to stuff, again, of a sexual nature. Weeping tears on to someone's feet, then wiping them with one's hair in those circumstances, would have been, well, inappropriate. Taken together, the stories suggest that the other guests were discomfited and indignant. Who here might not identify with them, just a little bit? Imagine if you were the host and this kind of thing took place at your table.

But set that aside for a moment and behold this non-conformist, human person, this sometimes named, sometimes not named woman who is overwhelmed by what appears to be love and compassion and reverence and gentleness towards Jesus. From some of the accounts, we might also take it that she is beside herself with remorse of some kind, overwhelmed (as we all ought to be at times) by the awareness of our need to be restored and healed (rescued is not too strong a term) from the predicament we have found ourselves in, from the kind of persons we have inadvertently become.

Of the variety of accounts of this seemingly same original story, the one I value the most is that of Luke. Luke makes us privy to the private thoughts of the host: 'If this man were a prophet he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him – that she is a sinner' [7.39]. Then Jesus, who knows or intuits these private thoughts of the host, turns to him and says: 'Simon, I have something to say to you.'... 'A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?' Simon answered, 'I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt.' And Jesus said to him, 'You have judged rightly.' [vv40-43].

And then the meaning – already apparent – is driven home. Jesus turns towards the woman, "and says to Simon, 'Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.'" [vv44-47].

This is a brilliant scene, a great story, a deceptively simple insight distilling the meaning of the gospels of Christ and the nature of God. Some forms of reductionism are dangerous and unhelpful, some are not. This is not. It forms the best study-aid, the best briefing, the only summation and the only introduction needed for the way of a Christian: that love is God's meaning; that love is the only currency and gold standard; the only informer of actions and conduct; the ultimate and great redeemer of our lostness and the great healer and expander of our hearts. This is love not as (or only as) a feeling, but as an orientation, an attitude, a way of thinking about and approaching life, a way of engaging with life. Rescue this from all the sugary and smaltzy associations the word love has been plastered with over the years. And if you need help in this, pay attention to this Passiontide and immerse yourself in the events of Holy Week, for there love's meaning is made plain.

Amen.

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