

What an extraordinary scene that must have been at the dinner table in Bethany. Just imagine it. Here were the disciples reclining around the food, along with Lazarus the one Jesus had raised from the dead. Martha, of course was busy keeping an eye on the plates and serving them. Then comes Mary with the costly perfume to anoint Jesus' feet, and the beautiful fragrance filled the whole room. It was probably shocking to the disciples. Mary showed a level of intimacy to a man that would have been scandalous. What kind of authority did she think she had to give this kind of blessing? What was it that inspired Mary? Did she have some prescient foreknowledge of the ordeal that Jesus was about to endure? What kind of passion she must have had for Jesus! Do you ever wish you had that kind of passion, that kind of love for the Lord?

Then there was Judas. He may not have been the only one shocked by the profligate use of this precious oil. We might well have been shocked ourselves in this day and age when we know the price of everything, but not necessarily their value. It actually is an age old question: do we use our resources to glorify and praise God, or do we use them to feed the poor? Do we purchase the stained glass window, or give the money to outreach. There is nothing new in that question.

Mary chose to honor Jesus by anointing his feet. There is tremendous symbolism in that. Anointing had been an honored tradition for centuries. It was a way of sanctifying someone, to separate them out for God's purpose, and asking for an infusion of God's grace. It is a sign of health, abundance, and God's favor. In Exodus God calls the priests to anoint the altar in order to consecrate it and make it sacred. Aaron was anointed when he was called and made a priest. Samuel anointed David, even when he was still a shepherd boy, to be king over Israel, and that separated him out and gave him his destiny.

Even today we continue to anoint with oil as a special kind of blessing, or in order to mark a change in status. Kings and queens are still anointed when they are crowned. Queen Elizabeth was anointed by the Archbishop of Canterbury when she ascended the throne. We anoint those who are baptized with the very same oil as we are set apart as Christians, marked as Christ's own forever, and made to be royal members of the kingdom of God. We anoint those being confirmed. And I still remember having my hands anointed at my ordination.

The oil we use for anointing is called chrism. It is the same root of the word for Christ, which literally means the "anointed one." From the scriptures, it was known that the Messiah would be the anointed one of God. Do you suppose that Mary knew that? Perhaps her anointing of Jesus is her deep expression of faith that he is indeed the Messiah, the anointed one. Jesus said that he came so that the scriptures might be fulfilled. So perhaps she anointed him in order to fulfill the scriptures.

On Tuesday of Holy Week the bishop will bless the oils we use throughout the year. There are three kinds. Sacred Chrism is the oil infused with the fragrance of balsam which we use at baptisms, confirmations, and ordinations. It is the same chrism that is used to anoint kings and queens. The bishop will bless the oil of catechumens which is used to anoint those beginning a process of study and growth in preparation for confirmation. And he will bless the oil of the sick which will be used to anoint those who are seeking physical, mental or spiritual healing. Chrism has always been a sacramental symbol of health and wholeness.

Mary anointed Jesus' feet which will soon be pierced with the nails of crucifixion. It is such an ugly wound. Perhaps she anointed him as a kind of sad protest to the evil about to take

place, a statement that in Jesus was healing and wholeness which would soon be so corrupted. And finally, her anointing was a foreshadowing of his death and burial. Remember the women came to the tomb to anoint his dead body, but he was not there. So Mary's anointing was indeed his burial preparation.

Anointing is a physical sign of God's blessing. Now, that is one of the privileges and duties that the church gives ordained people to do. We are given authority to speak for the church in blessing and sacramental anointing. We are given that authority because through our study and experience, and through the grace given us at ordination, we may have a *slightly* better chance of discerning what should be blessed and what should not. We bless all kinds of things, willy-nilly. We bless the bread and wine at Eucharist, we bless the people at the end of the service, we bless marriages and send folks off to their burial with a blessing. We bless pets on St. Francis day. We even bless Harley's and boats. In blessing these things, we are asking that God show his favor on them. We are praying for healing, and safety, and wholeness and that in some way these people and things might be dedicated to God's service.

What may be more revealing is what we choose not to bless. That can get us into hot water fast. My priest many years ago said that he had withheld communion only once, from a man who was an unrepentant child abuser. We can excommunicate as well as bless, but we better tell the bishop pretty fast. The man was quite angry and left the church, but hopefully when he thinks about it, it might lead to repentance and blessing later. We don't bless war, at least not since the Crusades, although we bless the soldiers who fight in them. We don't bless relationships of infidelity, although we pray for those who are in them. We don't bless ignoring the Sabbath, although people ask me to. What we bless or don't bless may be the only power the church has that the world still pays any attention to.

Perhaps what was most shocking was the chutzpah Mary showed in anointing the Lord. She was giving him her blessing, when we expect that it is God who blesses us. She was claiming a kind of authority to do that, an authority not granted by any human institution. It is a curious thing that we have our own blessings to give. At the end of Morning and Evening Prayer, we say "Let us bless the Lord," as if God needs or wants our blessing. But I believe he does want our blessings because he wants a mutuality to our relationship with him. We can bless because he has blessed us first, and so Mary's authority to bless the Lord was given to her by God.

In the end, what may be important is not so much giving blessing, but being a blessing. When we are present with the lost and the lonely, when we show care for those who are sick and suffering, when we stick up for the powerless, then we are a blessing to them. When we support the church even when we disagree, when we give our time and treasure to the church to further its mission, then we are a blessing to the church and each other. When we proclaim the gospel, when we give praise in worship, when we seek God in prayer, then we are a blessing to God.

In the words of Psalm 133:

Oh, how good and pleasant it is, when brethren live together in unity!

It is like fine oil upon the head, that runs down upon the beard,

Upon the beard of Aaron, and runs down the collar of his robe.

It is like the dew of Hermon, that falls upon the hills of Zion.

For there the Lord has ordained his blessings: life for evermore.

We have been blessed. We have been anointed. Let us bless the Lord.