

Holy Textures

Understanding the Bible in its own time and in ours

John 12:1-8

"In this passage, John has Mary portray the shocking intimacy of loyalty, trust, and bonding with Jesus that over-rides cultural norms; and contrasts that with the disloyalty and dishonesty of Judas."

Year C, Season of Lent

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#).

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In the Gospel of John, this lesson is the last event before Jesus enters Jerusalem for the last time on the day we now call Palm Sunday.

Bethany is a small community within walking distance of Jerusalem. It is the home town of Lazarus, whom Jesus has raised from the dead, [John 11:17-44](#). This was the final straw for the Judean authorities, for as John reports them saying:

What are we to do? ... If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.

John 11:47-48

And as John then comments:

So from that day on they planned to put (Jesus) to death.

John 11:53

Jesus then "now longer walked about openly among the (Judeans), but went from (Bethany) to a town called Ephraim in the region near the wilderness." (John 11:54) But as the Passover Festival once again draws near, so Jesus - for the third time - also draws near Jerusalem. This time for the final sign; the final revelation of God's glory.

John then bookends the text we are reading today:

- **Before:** *"anyone who knew where Jesus was should let (the Judean elite authorities) know, so that they might arrest him;"* (John 11:57)
- **After:** *"When the great crowd of (Judeans) learned that (Jesus) was there ... the chief priests (i.e. the Judean elite authorities) planned to put Lazarus to death as well, since it was on account of him that many (Judeans) were deserting and were believing in Jesus."* (John 12:9-10)

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We need to know this context in order to make sense of Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet.

It was a normal custom of hospitality in elite homes for the host to have his slaves wash the feet of guests. But Mary's actions take this common action to whole new level.

First, she performs the action herself.

Second, normally a woman would never touch a man except her husband and children - and then only in private.

Third, a woman would never allow anyone other than her immediate family to see her hair.

Fourth, the cleaning of the feet was not done with perfume - especially with the amount mentioned here which would cost a year's wages for a peasant labourer.

Fifth, this not the anointing of the head as was done for installation of a new priest, prophet or king; nor of the whole body as was done for the dead. What does this signify? Malina comments (Page 205, see footnote below):

Jesus is about to do something of singular significance. As a rather wealthy mistress of the house, Mary of Bethany takes it upon herself to acknowledge and affirm Jesus' forthcoming significant action.

As a household that has connections with the elites in Jerusalem, Mary would be very aware of the plans underway to have Jesus arrested and executed. And she would know that the form of execution would be crucifixion by the Romans, since that is the method used when the intention is to not just kill a person but to kill what they stand for; to kill belief in them; to kill any possible continuing movement by followers.

And that form of death does not allow for a proper burial with proper anointing of the body. Often the bodies of the crucified were left on the cross for scavenging birds and animals to eat the flesh, with the remains later thrown into a pit.

As Jesus says, "leave her alone. She bought (the perfume) for the day of my burial." (John 12:7) And as Jesus does not say, "And we all know, there will be no proper burial."

Verse 8. The poor we do indeed still have with us. And no, we do not always have Jesus.

Yes, a day of unimaginable life lies ahead. But no, we do not always have Jesus with us.

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Yes, Jesus will speak of - and enact - many new and symbolic ways in which he will always be with us. ("I am the vine, you are the branches." ... "This is my body.") But at that moment, for his closet friends, no they will not always have Jesus with them.

Loving Jesus is not easy.

In this passage, John has Mary portray the shocking intimacy of loyalty, trust, and bonding with Jesus that over-rides cultural norms; and contrasts that with the disloyalty and dishonesty of Judas.

Like Mary, can we see what plainly lies ahead? And like her, can we take what we have set aside for our planned future, and instead commit it for the great work of following Jesus?

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* [Link to Amazon.com Bibliography for Bruce Malina, et. al.](#), Social Science Commentary on ... The Synoptic Gospels; The Gospel of John; The Book of Acts; The Letters of Paul; The Book of Revelation; and others.