

I speak to you in the name of God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Please be seated.

Our Gospel story from John this morning gives us much foreshadowing about what is to come as Jesus and the disciples travel back to Jerusalem following this time with his friends Lazarus, Martha, and Mary. In the chapter that preceded our Gospel reading for this morning, Jesus received word that his very dear friend, Lazarus, is ill and on the point of death. His sisters, Martha and Mary, want Jesus to come immediately to cure Lazarus so that he does not die. But, like other episodes in the Gospels, Jesus waits before acting. We saw this, for example, in the story of the wine at the wedding in Cana. Jesus was asked to do something about the wine running out at the wedding. But instead of immediately performing the miracle of turning the water into wine when his mother, Mary, asked, Jesus takes a step back. After a time, he does act. But he gives an explanation to his mother, Mary, and to the disciples that signals to them that he must always perform miracles for the glory of God alone and to bolster peoples' faith in God, and that he must not be perceived as performing miracles "on command" at the request of family or friends. Jesus does not want to be seen as a kind of "party trick" or as some magic man or as being the Son of God just for family and friends because he came to save all people. When Jesus is told that Lazarus is very sick, he says, "This illness does not lead to death; rather, it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." And he chooses to stay in the same place for another 2 days.

When Jesus and the disciples do arrive at the home of Lazarus and his sisters, there is much sorrow and mourning because Lazarus has, indeed, died. When the stone to the tomb is rolled back, there is a terrible stench because the body has been in the tomb for 4 days and this is a desert territory with very high temperatures. Jesus then calls out to Lazarus and he steps out of the tomb. It is important to make a distinction here between Jesus being able to perform the miracle of re-animating Lazarus and the resurrection of Christ. It is the Anglican perspective that, when Lazarus died, his soul did not take the same journey as the soul of Christ following the crucifixion. While it was still a miracle that Jesus was able to re-animate Lazarus, it was not a resurrection. If we were to think in terms

of our modern day medicine, we can find some parallels. If my heart were to stop in the middle of this sermon, I would hope that someone would call 911 and that the paramedics would be able to use a defibrillator and basically “shock” my heart into beating again. In that sense, they would be re-animating my body. But they would not be directing what would be going on with my soul and it would not be a resurrection. When Jesus re-animates Lazarus through the power of God, he is basically foreshadowing his own death and resurrection. But Jesus knows that there will be a significant difference. Lazarus died of an illness and his soul was effectively in a kind of holding pattern until Jesus called him back from the dead. But for Jesus, he will die an excruciatingly painful death at the hands of his enemies. He will be treated as a common criminal and left to hang on a cross on the outskirts of Jerusalem. But his soul will go on an extraordinary journey and then return to his body, coming back to life again through the power of God. It will be this unprecedented breakthrough of Christ’s body and soul breaking the chains of death that will pave the way for us to have eternal life.

And so, as we join the story this morning, Lazarus and his sisters are holding a dinner in honour of Jesus. It is six days before the Jewish Passover which was, and still is, a festival that commemorates the saving of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt when God sent a series of plagues on that area in response to Pharaoh’s refusal to give the Hebrews freedom. The final plague was that the first-born of every family would die unless the doorway of the house was marked with the blood of a lamb. We know from our vantage point in history that Jesus is near the end of his life. He has a lot of enemies, including the chief priests who are fearful that Jesus will lead a rebellion against the Roman Empire and cause all kinds of political turmoil. But on this particular evening, there is a celebration and Jesus is able to relax with his old and dear friends Lazarus, Martha, and Mary. It is interesting that Lazarus does not say anything, and that his sister Martha is busy rushing around organizing the dinner. But it is their sister, Mary, who does the most extraordinary thing by taking a fairly large quantity of a very expensive perfumed oil and anoints Christ’s feet. We are told that the entire house was filled with this perfume. There are some theologians who believe that Mary was in love with Jesus and had held the hope that they

might one day be married. Certainly Jesus was at the stage of life when a Jewish man was expected to find a wife and start a family, and it would have made sense for him to choose Mary for this role because of the relationship between the two families. But Jesus knew that his life must be devoted to his ministry and that marriage was not an option for him. Whether or not Mary realized this is something that we will never know. But whether it was a romantic love or the love of a close friend, we do know that Mary loved Jesus in a significant way and that this gesture was her way of showing it. It was an action that deeply moved Jesus.

But on the heels of Mary's gesture, we hear Judas Iscariot making a very hurtful and very tasteless comment about what she has done. He goes on to state what the oil would have cost and that the money should have instead been spent on the poor. Imagine how shocking it would be if someone were to throw a party for you which included presents, and one of the guests went into a speech about the cost of each gift and hinted that the giver was not very bright and that you, by extension, were just selfish for accepting the gift instead of asking that it be donated to the poor. Judas completely tramples on Mary's feelings and on her generosity. It is likely that it took her a full year to have saved up the money for the oil, and so this was also a gift that was a long time in the planning. Again, we know from our vantage point in history that this will be the last time that Mary will see Jesus. And so that makes Judas' comments seem doubly cruel.

By this point, Jesus has very likely begun to have doubts about Judas and about his loyalty to God and to the Christian movement. The writer of this Gospel is clearly very angry when he wrote this chapter because he added in brackets, "He (Judas) 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." This is a kind of editorial comment by the author and not what was actually said at the table. But we can safely assume that at least a few of the disciples, and possibly Jesus, believed it.

Jesus responds very quickly to Judas by saying, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." Jesus knows that, within about a week, he will be crucified. He

will be leaving Bethany and his friends Lazarus, Martha, and Mary, and returning to Jerusalem where he will die a terrible death. This dinner is a kind of foreshadowing of the Last Supper where Judas' betrayal will be completely revealed and the course of human history will be changed forever. If Judas had been a different kind of person, perhaps this incident with Jesus telling him off at this dinner would have caused Judas to rethink his attitude and his actions and he would have learned something. There was still time for Judas to change. But he didn't. Instead of taking all that Jesus had taught him about love and forgiveness and finding a constructive way to be a disciple, Judas chose the path of destruction. And in doing so, he lost his own soul.

And so what can we learn from Mary and Jesus and Judas this morning? What are the warnings and what are the blessings that we can draw from this story? What might we still do in this Lenten season to show love and kindness, and what courses of action might we still turn away from? My prayer for all of us this week, including myself, is that we take time to reflect on these questions as we move towards Palm Sunday. Amen.