



Lent 5, Year C – March 21, 2010

John 12.1-8

A Homily preached by the Rev'd Tara Livingston

In 2005 and again last year I had the honour and privilege of travelling to the Promised Land – the land that God gave to all descendants. While everyone that I travelled with had a different reaction, a different connection to the land, my heart lives there and while I'm there I feel at home.

In 2005 on my first day I entered the walled city of Old Jerusalem, three blocks from St. George 's College. I stood for a moment caught by the sight of the first great sign that I saw – "money changer". I was not yet near the temple but the irony was not lost. I walked over the cobbled streets with its wet stones caught in a forever dampness that I'm sure never leaves – the sun does not penetrate through the crowded buildings. The smell of spices mixed with sweat as the people jostled and called out to one another to lure each passer-by into checking out their wares. I imagine that this Jerusalem was not so different than the Jerusalem that Jesus entered in his youth.

Years later when I returned again the sights were still the same but when I entered the city on this occasion it was the smell that took me back in time, back to my first trip and in a way, back to the first century. Spices, sweat, cooking oil, incense, fresh herbs and newly slaughtered meat all combined to create a harmony of memories, some that were not even mine but rather things that I had only imagined.

In today's Gospel reading we hear about Mary and from what we know about her we can imagine her as a sweet, loyal and devoted disciple of Jesus. She has been with him from the beginning and in the Gospel of Luke we hear that she has been forgiven all of her sins for her actions. In Mark & Matthew the discourses are somewhat shorter and to the point. Listen to the detail in John:

"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."

With these words we can almost smell it, the fragrant oil.

But we mustn't forget another important detail – that also sitting at the table was Lazarus who had been raised from the dead. Imagine the stench of having been in the tomb for four days. Even as they gathered at the site of the tomb Mary said to Jesus, the odour will overtake us if we move the stone. These were people who were close and acquainted with death and its stench unlike our modern day embalming. Mary knew that to have Lazarus raised they would have to face the smell.

And now in Bethany, the site where Jesus came to continue his ministry in his last days, the place where he could walk up the hill and look into the city of Jerusalem, the place where he always slept when visiting the city, here in this safe place he is anointed with fragrant oil while sitting with the stench of a corpse beside him. It is quite the juxtaposition.

On a Friday while in Jerusalem we were able to witness the closing of the shops. The Jewish quarter notable by its new buildings and wide walkways, closed down in preparation for the Sabbath. We climbed down some steps from one of these new structures towards the Wailing Wall, now known as the Western Wall, where the faithful had gathered to pray. From an outsiders point of view it all looked very familiar. There were grandparents being escorted by youngsters, women and

children dressed in their Sunday best for Friday Sabbath. Music would burst out with no coherent leader but it was beautiful in its organic nature. The men gather at the wall to pray and the women gather off to the side. One girl, a beautiful girl with flirty eyes and long hair that she flipped with a distracted hand, was dressed in a pretty pink dress: young, maybe 15, with nothing other than her attractiveness to set her apart. Not even the rifle slung over her shoulder almost as an accessory, made her any different from her peers. Most of them were armed. At fourteen every Israeli is given a gun. Along the watch points from above Israeli soldiers, mostly Jewish by birth and not by religion, looked over the crowd with machine guns as the faithful gathered to pray. Hasidic Jews with their payus side curls standing beside other Jewish believers wearing their yarmulkes swaying back and forth in the rhythm of prayer. As a city girl from Canada I can't tell you how unsettling this contrast was – the piety of prayer surrounded by the killing ability of guns.

We have the beauty and piety of Mary, who is so close with Jesus that she spreads the fragrant oil on him with her hair. Picture this for a moment. Imagine being in a room with several people and a woman tickling and touching a mans feet with her hair. No matter who you are you can see that this is a moment of great intimacy, a kind of great passion. Her untarnished love for Jesus is expressed shamelessly as she rubs oil into his hard, swollen and dried out feet.

And then in the midst of the abundant love we hear from Judas as he berates her for spending so lavishly on Jesus rather than giving it to the poor. We find ourselves torn out of the beauty of the moment. It is debatable as to whether or not Judas ever had a charitable thought in his head but, as we know, he is preparing to betray Jesus to his death.

The beauty of the praying people with the shiny black guns glistening in the light of the disappearing sun. Abundant love and devotion marred by fear, uncertainty and distrust.

Judas' impure and adulterated heart could not stand in the face of the pure heart of Mary. His plotting and scheming, whether for money or not, could not stand silent in the face of the intimate moment of Mary anointing Jesus for the death that Judas himself knew for sure was about to come. We have the true discipleship of Mary up and against the false discipleship of Judas.

As we travel through the desert on the horizon we see an outcropping of buildings, low and flat with barrels on the roofs to catch the rain. It appears to be close but that too is a trick as we travel for another half an hour before we reach it. We stumble out of the air conditioned bus and the heat hits us with such a force that for a moment we lose our breath. We meet our guide; a small man named Abu Hani, who will lead us on our tour of Hebron, the traditional burial place of Abraham and Sarah. He takes us to the Oak of Mamre – an ancient tree that he assures us is exactly 4820 years old because for him that is the age of the earth. He is a funny little man, short in stature with a big belly and an even bigger laugh.

"What did Adam give Eve on the first Christmas?" he asks with a twinkle in his eye. "Nothing! Jesus not born yet!" He then buckled over with laughter slapping his thigh and when he looked up there were tears rolling down his cheeks. No one thought Abu Hani was funnier....than Abu Hani.

After touring the religious sites – a story for another time, we walked along a dingy alley way. Great stones, some a metre square, towered above us on either side and we found comfort in the shade that they provided. It was dark and cool and yet it felt shabby and worn. It was not the kind of alley that I would walk along by myself,

I was sure. Suddenly, Abu Hani stopped abruptly stopping the forward marching of our group of 10. With his hands up in the air he said "You are all my friends now, now I take you to my home!" It wasn't until then that I realized that he had stopped beside a small green metal door. Surely he was joking. No one could live here, no one could live with such a small entrance off of such a dingy street.

He pushed the door open and waved us through. Feeling like we were being set up for another of his grand jokes (because no one thought that Abu Hani was funnier...than Abu Hani) we ducked down a bit and entered the green metal door, squeezing by Abu Hani's wide berth. And there before us was a courtyard. A beautiful courtyard not covered by a roof, but with sunshine beaming down on an overgrowth of plants and flowers. From the inside of the door the stones no longer looked menacing and overcrowded – now they looked cool and bright. A few stairs up and to the right was the kitchen, a few more stairs to the left were the bedrooms. As we rose through the flights of stairs we ended in the formal living room filled with large, overstuffed Turkish furniture and here we were served coffee by the oldest grandchild in the brood.

The generosity was in stark contrast to the humble and yet beautiful surroundings. This was a seven hundred year old home in the same family for all of those generations. One of the only nods to modernism was that they plastered over the grand, damp stones in an attempt to paint. Only thing is, the dampness in the stones does eventually seep out and therefore the plaster fell from the ceiling silently into my coffee cup as I drank.

From the dense, dark, creepy alley way we had found an oasis through an almost invisible metal green door and were treated to the very best they had to offer. These were not people who had much but what they had they shared with us; with strangers. Abu Hani did not offer us coffee out of obligation but out of a true sense of hospitality.

Imagine then what you might give to Jesus Christ himself. Imagine the extravagance that you might present if you had but the chance to offer something, anything, to the man that gave up everything that we might live.

Mary did not offer the perfume out of obligation but out of true and unadulterated love for Jesus. He had raised Lazarus from the dead and in doing so created a lot of publicity for himself putting himself more firmly in the sights of the leaders. He had healed the sick, spoken out for the poor and taught people another way to fight – a way to rise up against oppression that did not require them to arm themselves with swords.

Mary loved him, everything about him, and out of that love poured pure devotion. It was not about the year's wages that she spent, and at that moment it was not about feeding the poor. In contrast to the black heart of Judas, Mary shows us what devotion was.

And in her mind and all who were there, the smell of sweet perfume rather than the stench of death would be the thing that they remembered...

So imagine, if he were here right now, what would he smell like? Would it be the sweet perfume or the stench of death? If he were here who would you be, the devoted and generous disciple who is willing to give everything to express your love or the dark heart of Judas who counts the pennies as wasteful? If he were here, would you be devoted and doting, dedicated and faithful like Mary or would you lose your faith in the sight of a momentary better offer?

We all have a choice. We are surrounded by contrasting values every day, but we all have a choice.

I'm sure that Jesus would smell of sweet perfume because in his death he conquered death for us all. It is certainly sweet perfume that I smell.

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