

Over the past weeks we have been working away through the gospel of John. Gospel is an old-fashioned word which means good news and John tells us that he has written this book to explain to us the good news about Jesus.

Anything surprising, strange, amazing or that you would want to know more about?

In the reading today we find ourselves in a situation filled with tension and anger and a bit of embarrassment. People who write novels and screenplays like that kind of situation: anger and bitterness bubbling to the surface, family members losing their tempers with each other, and guests looking on in embarrassment at the collapse of the occasion. I don't know if you have ever found yourself involved in something like that but it can be very difficult. Sometimes people simply ignore it and pretend that nothing has happened. Sometimes those involved storm off in opposite directions leaving people behind to wonder what on earth has happened, and what they should do next. A shared meal really should be a time for support and friendship, not of destruction and violence.

The irony of this scene is that Jesus really needs his followers to be united. We read in the previous chapter that people are trying to kill him and, you would have thought, that his friends might have had the decency to stick together and support him. Right at that important point what we find is not support but confrontation. It's a very obvious confrontation between Judas and Mary but I wonder if there is also something in this story between Mary and Martha.

We've met the sisters before in the previous chapter and they also appear in Luke chapter 10. What we read about them tells us so much and we know much more about them than many of the other characters mentioned in the Gospels, even some of the 12 disciples Jesus chose.

Martha has, yet again, made a meal for Jesus and his friends. Mary, not to be outdone, steals the limelight, not this time simply by sitting

and listening to Jesus, but by her apparently outrageous gesture of anointing Jesus' feet and wiping them with her hair. In order to do that she would have needed to uncover and let down her hair; that's roughly the equivalent, at a modern dinner party, of a woman coming to the table and only her underwear. You can imagine the onlookers' reaction. Has she no shame? What does she think she's doing? Who does she think she is? All sorts of disturbing thoughts must have been flying around the room. Perhaps the tension in the room was made worse by knowledge of the violence being plotted against Jesus.

Can you imagine, in particular, how Martha felt? She may well have thought that Mary had gone over the top this time; but it was Judas who came out and said it. The other disciples looked on, probably equally embarrassed by Mary's behaviour, her extravagance, by Judas' outburst and by Jesus' strange comment. Most of us looking on would have blamed Mary, after all, if she hadn't done that there would be no issue. John, however, is quite clear where the blame lies. Judas, he says, had in any case been helping himself out of the common purse so his reaction was not sincere. He didn't really care about the poor, he cared about the money.

Jesus reacts differently and what he says is difficult to understand. The suggestion is that Mary has been keeping this expensive perfume to anoint Jesus' body after his death in John 11:50 Caiaphas, the High Priest, says, *you do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.* John brings this comment in to highlight what would happen to Jesus. Today, by her action, Mary may be saying more than she knows. Her act of love is a prophetic statement about the fact that before too long Jesus is going to be buried - And buried so hastily that there might not be the time for proper anointing, so he needed it right then.

On the other hand, it also suggests that Mary should now keep the perfume, or anything that's left of it, for the day of Jesus' burial; and that this purpose will be even more important than selling it to give to the poor. In other words, even if she hadn't done what she did, it

would still have been appropriate to hang on to it to anoint Jesus body for burial.

This is an amazing statement given how often Jesus talked about caring for the poor and giving generously to make sure they are cared for. It looks like Jesus believed his coming death was even more important than looking after the poor. In fact, he saw that his coming death would be the action through which the whole world would be put right, including poverty and all that goes with it. Looking from this side of the resurrection, and still facing a world of poverty, crippling debt and all the evils which flow from them, we might reasonably ask ourselves if the church has always had its priorities right.

But there is no escaping the challenge posed by the stand-off between Mary and Judas. It begs us to ask where we would be in the picture.

Are you with the shameless Mary, worshipping Jesus with everything she's got, risking the anger of her sister who's doing all the hard work, the anger of the men who don't quite trust their own feelings when a woman lets her hair down in public, and the sneer of the person who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing?

Or are you with the cautious, prudent, reliable Judas (That's how he seemed to them at that time – when Judas leaves the Last Supper [John 13:29] they guess he must be going to give something to the poor), looking after the meagre resources of a group which has no steady or settled income, anxious to provide for their needs, but wanting to have some left to give to the poor? Put aside your natural inclination to distance yourself from Judas. After all, even at that last moment none of the other disciples had suspected him of treachery. Can you see just a glimpse of him as you look in the mirror?

Or are you in the kitchen with Martha the martyr, always too busy helping others to spend time with Jesus?

Or are you in the company of people sitting watching, slightly embarrassed at the situation, wanting to be part of things, enjoying the company and the food, but not yet ready to fully commit?

Where are you? Everyone is somewhere or someone in the story and, not much later, each of these characters will find themselves having to make a choice – for Jesus, or not for Jesus; there is no other option. All of us also have to make that choice.

I would dearly love to be Mary – all out for Jesus, but then I remember that too often I, like Judas, have my own agenda; like Martha am often too busy; like the crowd choose not to fully engage.

There was no mistaking what Mary did – even those not actually present in the room would have caught the scent of the perfume. True worship is like that – it changes the atmosphere. You begin to feel the presence of God. Your heart is warmed and you long for more. You have a deeper understanding that there is sin in your life, but also that there is an over-abundance of grace available from God to deal with it. You become small and God becomes huge. You begin to realise the incredible privilege we have to be his son or daughter.

I think the church in Scotland needs more Marys – people who will worship without inhibition, not caring what other people think, not focussed on the time, or lunch, or the person you have to talk to after the service – but focussed on Jesus and worshipping him, each and every day, not just Sunday mornings. So, if you ever pray for me, would you pray that my attitude is more like Mary than Martha, Judas or the uncommitted crowd.