

St Mary and St Peter's Church, Sunderland

Pontus Bramberg

Monday of Holy Week, AD 2023

May I speak in the name of God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Today's Gospel is the well-known story where Mary of Bethany anoints the feet of Our Lord with a very expensive perfume: it could be sold for 300 denarii; for context a common soldier or an unskilled labourer would have been paid only slightly more than that in a year (they were paid about one denarius per day) and the most senior army officers were paid around 15,000 denarii per year. It can thus (if we for a moment disregard the motivation for his comment) seem as if Judas Iscariot had a point when he said it could be sold in order to give to the poor since it would be a very significant donation. What Mary is doing by anointing the feet of Christ is witnessing to her faith in him. The reaction of Judas is a judgement based on a perceived waste of resources but Mary does not seem to see this as a waste, as indeed it is not; she believes in Christ (as indeed we would expect after the Lord raised her brother Lazarus from the dead) and honours him by anointing him with something very precious, likely among the most precious things she owned. The failure to give this to the poor is not something that seems to bother Our Lord in this moment, indeed he seems to imply that Mary's actions are better or more honourable than giving to the poor. This is not to say that giving to the poor is not good, in fact helping the poor is a way of seeing Christ in our neighbour and as he himself says elsewhere 'just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me' [Matthew 25:40]; the point here thus is not that we should not be giving to the poor but that our foremost calling is bearing witness to the Lord, not only in word but also in deed. We cannot anoint Christ's feet with valuable perfume as Mary did but we can bear witness to Christ in this day and age; there are many ways to do this but some of the most important ones are giving to the poor, supporting the Church, and being unafraid to share our faith with others. Apart from this point there is a symbolism to the anointing, which chronologically occurs on Wednesday of Holy Week, just two days prior to the death of Our Lord: it is a preparation for Christ's burial and indeed the women who discovered the empty tomb were on their way to anoint Christ's body; this had not been completed before he was laid in the tomb since the Sabbath begun in the evening after Christ's death (the traditional Jewish day lasts from sunset to sunset). I do not intend to bore you with too much of the theological significance of oil and anointing but it is notable that under the Old Covenant anointing was practised for priests and kings, as indeed it is under the New Covenant although it can also be practised at Baptism, Confirmation, and when a person is seriously ill. Anointing is thus a sign of consecration, that is to say setting apart for a sacred purpose, indeed chiefly through Baptism but also through the other sacramental rites which include anointing a person is set apart for Christ: Baptism and Confirmation initiate us into the full fellowship of

Christ's religion, Holy Orders sets apart those whom God and the Church have called to a particular kind of service as deacons, priests, and bishops. The coronation of a king or an emperor also includes anointing and, although not sacramental of itself, is also indicative of a setting apart for a particular service as an instrument of God.

Amen.