

LENT 5, Apr. 7, 2019, Year C

- It is evening in Bethany, the little village near the top of the Mount of Olives. A dinner party has been planned at a small and modest home, inhabited by Mary, Martha and Lazarus. With their extended invitation, the three siblings plan to honor a special guest. Since the three are living *together*, some folks assume they don't have much money. This fits well with the highly symbolic world of their Scriptures, because Bethany, in Hebrew, means *house of the poor*.
- Jesus is a close friend to these three siblings, *each one so different from the others*. They embrace him with a love that helps us see what *godly friendship* is all about. Jesus and the siblings are especially close now. After seeing his loving tears at Lazarus' tomb, and how he brought their brother back to life, *he is dear to the two sisters' hearts*.
- While evening brings quiet to the village, those gathered for the meal sense a wariness amongst the neighbors. *Jesus' arrival in nearby Jerusalem has evoked tension and conflict*. Despite this, his beloved friends appear *not to realize that* Lazarus' resuscitation has prompted *a plan to kill Jesus*. Just before describing this supper, John tells us that the chief priests and the Pharisees have ordered anyone knowing where Jesus was, to report it, so *they might arrest him*.¹ Tension radiates outward from the Temple, throughout the city. *But at the top of the hill across the Kidron Valley, in the soft light of small oil lamps, Jesus and his disciples are welcomed to dinner*. Despite having a small household with limited means, their hosts have planned a festive and joyous evening.
- With spiritual insight, James Tissot has captured the circumstances of Jesus' *slow walk to the dinner*. The Eastern Wall of the Temple is at Jesus' back ~ the very place where he will enter in a few days on what we now call 'Palm Sunday.' *He is ascending the mount from which it was believed the Messiah would someday come, and enter into the Temple*.² In a very subtle way,

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Tissot visually hints at the *storms hovering over the Holy City* as the Passover approaches. Yet, at this moment, Jesus walks quietly toward what he surely wishes will be a peaceful evening ~ and for a pause from the stress and pressure that his coming to Jerusalem has aroused.

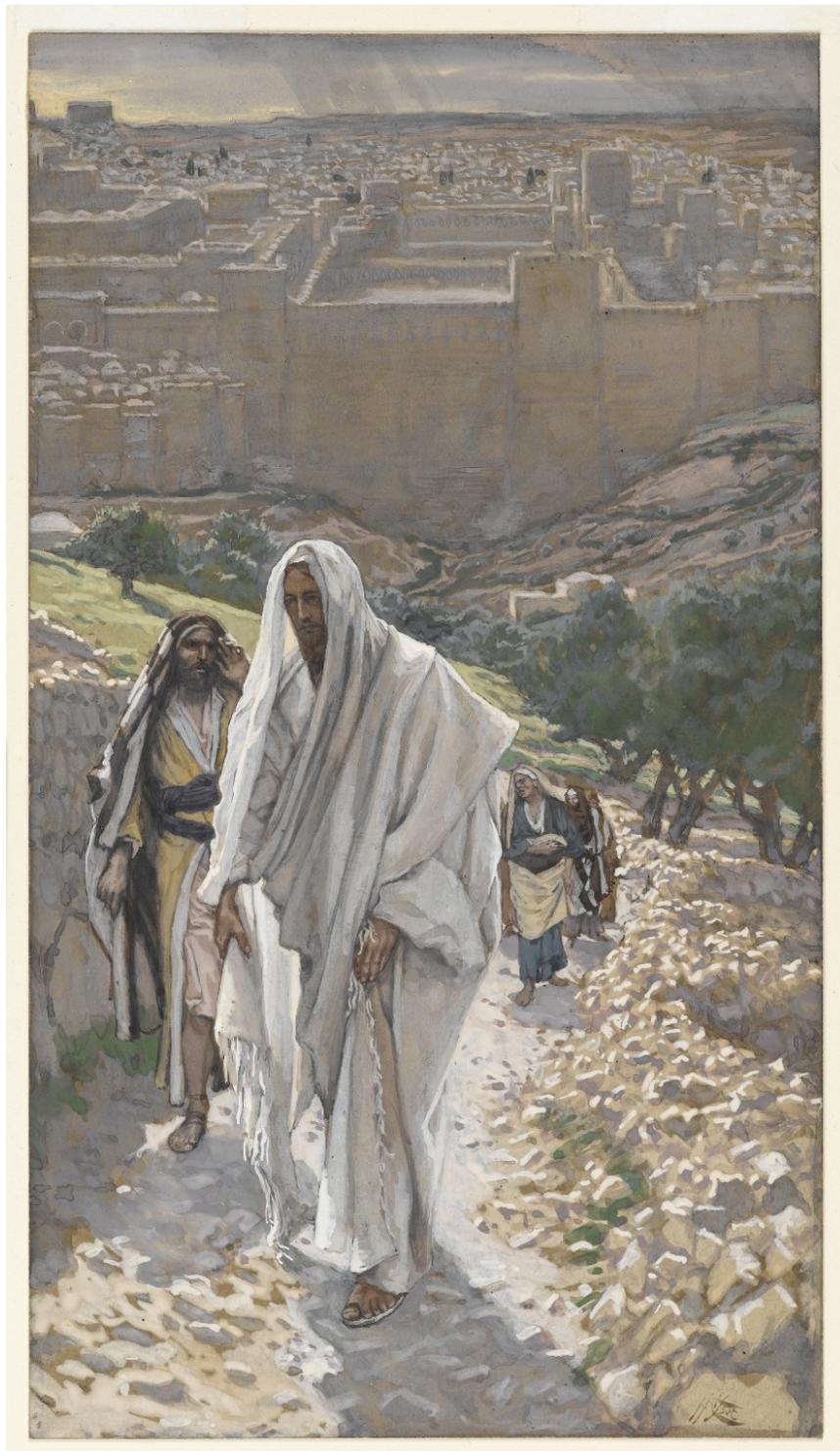
- Jesus' supper with the siblings *might otherwise have been* a simple one. It *likely* would then have been overlooked by the Gospels and their preoccupation with the drama of Jesus' last days. But it was not to be. Mary, moved by her love for him, and by the stunning gift of her brother's return to life, is inspired. And so she engages in a wildly extravagant act. *Taking a whole pound of expensive pure nard, she pours the perfumed ointment onto his feet and spreads the precious oil with her hair.*³ The entire house becomes filled with the intoxicating smell of costly nard, especially when she stands and moves her head. This unexpectedly sensuous sight, along with its accompanying fragrance, is arresting. Conversation around the low tables ceases.
- *Nard is one of the alluring perfumes possessed by the beloved bride in the Song of Songs.*⁴ *Nard is also a luxurious burial spice with which bodies are prepared for the tomb.* Mary, like Martha her sister, is a symbol ~ she is a figure for the Church, for the beloved bride of Christ ~ *a mystical key* to understanding the moment.⁵ And so, *anointed with the same nard as Jesus, Mary symbolizes the Body of Christ anointed to share his death and burial.* Unknowingly, she becomes like Jesus in his impending death, so that she might attain to the resurrection from the dead.⁶
- Though not numbered among 'the twelve,' *the three Bethany siblings are also Jesus' disciples. They model their discipleship in the generous hospitality they offer, as they share their dinner table with him and his other friends.* We also see this discipleship manifest in Mary's *seemingly irrational* act. For *she takes a very expensive spice –what might have cost a laborer a*

whole year's wages— and apparently wastes it in a moment of delirious excess.

- As if on cue, *the keeper of the purse* for the twelve, speaks up. *Judas knows the cost of everything* because he feels responsible for the disciples' shared expenses. He asks, "Why was this perfume *not sold* for three hundred denarii, and the money *given to the poor*?" Overlooking its *burial* implications for Jesus, he sees it *only* as perfume for Mary.
- Here we have a stunning contrast. Mary, the sister of Lazarus, knows and understands the *value* of what has come to their lives through Jesus. It *exceeds everything* in this world that is measured by *price*. *With something very costly, Mary offers a sacrifice of thanks and praise.* But Judas, who *knows the cost of worldly things, cannot see what is of true value.* By speaking of 'what might have been offered to the poor,' he appears ready to sacrifice *what has cost him nothing.*⁷ As Jesus had said, "for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."⁸ Mary's heart was with Jesus; Judas' heart was with the common purse.
- As a result of Lazarus' raising from the dead, and his sisters' experience of that moment with Jesus, *both Martha and Mary have their eyes set on a higher horizon.* Like everyone else, they do not yet see 'the big picture.' But *they have a heightened awareness that there is more to be seen than is now apparent.* For them, as for us, '*seeing more*' starts with *seeing Jesus* ~ with seeing him more *clearly*, so that we can love him more *dearly* and follow him more *nearly.*⁹ This greater openness to seeing more of Jesus unites those who are guided by him. It also isolates Judas, who at this point *merely walks with* Jesus because *his eyes are set elsewhere.*
- This leads us to another bit of light glowing in the darkness of that Bethany evening. Judas helps us see *this*: that *we can give hospitality to the poor*

without necessarily giving hospitality to Jesus. Which then helps us notice its corollary. For by giving *genuine hospitality* to Jesus, we are moved to give hospitality to the poor, with whom he so readily identified.

- As C. S. Lewis observed, "It is since *Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world* that they have become so ineffectual *in this*. **Aim at Heaven and you will get earth 'thrown in': aim at earth and you will get neither.**"¹⁰ So, when *–in our hearts and minds–* we give real hospitality to Jesus, we are moved to give *more than passing* hospitality to those who are in need. In either form of hospitality, we can go beyond what we consider to be 'reasonable.' For Scripture suggests that *both forms of hospitality are intrinsically related.*
- *At this dinner, Mary models a beautifully extravagant idea.* It is to offer *all that we are, and all that we have* to God's self-revelation in Jesus! And, for the sake of God's kingdom! *To make such an offering* is way beyond the usual and reasonable bounds *within which* we constrain ourselves. And *far beyond* the usual prudent limits by which we measure things *in terms of* cost. But *as we see in Mary's example,* there is usually only one thing that *moves us to respond in this way: joy!* Sheer joy grabs her heart and moves her to give *her all.* ~ She gives her all *to him,* and to **the new life** that he is *even now* unleashing in this world.



James Tissot, *Jesus Goes in the Evening to Bethany*

John 12:1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. 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. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He 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.) Jesus said, "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."

Notes:

¹ See John 11:57.

² The four Gospels differ on the chronological sequence and details concerning Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, as well as his visit to Bethany. Here, I follow the sequence suggested by our Gospel reading from John.

³ See the parallel story in Mark 14.

⁴ See the Song of Songs 1:12; 4:13 & 14.

⁵ See John Shea, *The Relentless Widow, Year C*, in his *Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2006), p. 98ff.

⁶ This is like what Paul suggests about himself, in our Philippians reading.

⁷ Note this contrast with the sentiment of King David, as expressed in 1 Chronicles 21:24.

⁸ See Matthew 6:21 and Luke 12:34, in context.

⁹ To paraphrase the words of St. Richard of Chichester, as found in Hymn 654 in *The Hymnal 1982*.

¹⁰ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2001), p. 134.