

Reflections On The Eye Of The Hurricane

John 12:1-8

March 25, 2007

I.

Today's Gospel places us on the brink of the events that will be the focus of next Sunday and the following week. Jesus now knew the time was near. The die was cast. Events were unfolding and the final parts of the drama of his earthly life were about to be revealed.

No longer was Jesus the teacher, or the preacher, or the healer, or the source of miracles. No longer was he traveling the Galilean countryside revealing the will of God as to how we should live our lives and love each other in preparation for the coming of God's Kingdom.

Now, it was about him, not about us. He was prepared for his suffering, death, and glorification. Today's reading begins the Passion Narrative in the Bible, and it prepares us for Passion Week which comes after we celebrate Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem next Sunday.

As a result, it's appropriate for preachers to change their approaches a little today. Frequently, our purpose is to find ways in which readings from Scripture can speak to us now. We try to offer insights as to how words of the Bible from two thousand years ago can apply to our modern lives.

And I will do that to some extent here. But we also are dealing with the final days of the life of our Lord and Savior, and that story should be preached for what it is and how it happened at the time.

II.

Before exploring today's reading in more detail, however, it would be useful just to review how Jesus and his disciples got to this point. This has not been covered in earlier readings.

Today's reading in some ways is like the eye of a hurricane. It was more than just the calm before the storm because, as we shall see, the storm already had come ashore. But this dinner for Jesus in the home of Lazarus was a brief respite, a welcome interval of peace, a temporary suspension of the turbulence that came upon the land as Jesus became a greater threat to the established order.

A few days earlier, Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. You remember the story. Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, had been dead for four days, and Jesus approached the cave where he was interred, ordered the stone at the entrance to be rolled aside, and commanded Lazarus to come out. The image comes to mind. Lazarus walked out, wrapped in grave clothes, alive again.

This was the last straw for the Sanhedrin. And we remember that the Sanhedrin was the Jewish religious and judicial body that was permitted by their Roman overlords to oversee Jewish society. As conquered people they were not allowed to have governmental organizations, and so the Sanhedrin, which consisted of the Pharisees, Sadducees, rabbis, elders, and prominent Jews, acted as judges in local Jewish issues, and as the final authority in Jewish religious matters.

And we also recall some of the chief priests, concerned about Jesus' growing popularity, called an emergency meeting of the Sanhedrin. They were especially worried about how more and more people were believing in Jesus because of the miraculous raising of Lazarus. St. John quotes them earlier in his Gospel as saying, "this man is performing many signs. If we let him

go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.”

And then Caiaphas, the high priest said in the next verses, “you do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.”

As a result, because the Sanhedrin feared for its own existence and its own prerogatives, it made plans to put Jesus to death. They were willing to sacrifice Jesus so that peace and order could be maintained in society, and so that the Romans would not be provoked into shutting down the Sanhedrin and imposing direct rule on the Jewish people.

So they gave orders that anyone knowing of Jesus’ whereabouts should report him so that he might be arrested. In response, Jesus temporarily stopped moving publicly among the Jews and remained out of sight.

That was how the symbolic hurricane to which I referred already had come ashore. It also was the backdrop for today’s gospel and the dinner party at Lazarus’ home where Jesus was anointed by Mary. And that dinner was the brief interval in the tempest and turmoil that had been unleashed by the Sanhedrin, and that would resume the next day as the hurricane moved forward when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey.

But for that night, things were calm; the eye of the hurricane. It was the last time that Jesus peacefully gathered with his friends and woke up in the morning still a free man.

III.

So, here Jesus was, at a dinner party in his honor. Who was there? Who were the actors in the drama? Well, there was the recently-dead Lazarus, in whose home they were brought together. And there were Mary and Martha, Lazarus’ sisters, whose stereotypes had preceded them in Scripture. Mary was contemplative and spiritual and Martha seemed concerned about preparations for her guests. And of course, there was Judas, the betrayer. It was an interesting cast of characters.

While they were eating, Mary took out a very expensive bottle of perfume and anointed Jesus’ feet and wiped them with her hair. This probably was more easily accomplished than it might seem because in those days people dined reclining on couches rather than sitting on chairs with their feet on the floor.

In any event Judas, in a false display of piety, criticized Mary and said she should have sold the perfume and given the money to the poor. Jesus would have none of that, and told Judas to leave her alone. He said “you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me.”

Two things in this story are worth noting. One was what Mary did. The other was what Jesus said. Let’s look at each of them.

IV.

What Mary did was a poignant and tender act of devotion to the man she saw raise her brother from the dead. This type of perfume apparently was used on someone’s head, not their feet, and wiping it with her hair was the ultimate in humility. In those days only servants attended to the feet.

By now Mary probably knew who Jesus was and had some idea of his fate. As she anointed Jesus she probably recognized him as anointed by God to serve humanity. In this way, she

foreshadowed what Jesus himself did at the Last Supper. When Jesus washed the disciples' feet, Mary already had done the same for him.

So, in the midst of the plots and schemes to arrest Jesus and put him to death, and as intrigue and betrayal swirled about, Mary gave a profound and heartfelt demonstration of love, gratitude, and devotion to Jesus. It was an example of faithful discipleship in a true time of trial.

Perhaps that is what we are to understand from what Mary did. She was a model for faithful discipleship. As she loved Jesus, so also are we called to love Jesus in the same way. And as Jesus accepted Mary's devotion, so also will he accept ours if we but give it.

Discipleship can be defined by how we respond to Christ's call to us, and Mary's example shows us the way. Obviously, we are not in Jesus' physical presence and we would express our devotion in different ways. But the significance of our honoring Jesus will be the same. He calls us to him, and rebukes those, like Judas, who would deter us from doing so.

V.

Jesus' words to Judas also warrant examination. I quoted him earlier but will do so again. After telling Judas to leave Mary alone, he said "you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me."

Some people erroneously have construed this as divine justification for the continuation of poverty. They say that by placing himself above the poor, Jesus sanctioned poverty.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Jesus always made concern for the poor a priority, and Scripture is replete with his teachings to that effect. Jesus was not saying the poor should not receive help. He just was recognizing that there always would be poverty in this broken world until God's kingdom on earth is established.

But even though Jesus always taught that specific acts of grace are called for to help particular groups, such as the poor, on this night he knew that the larger picture of his destiny as the saving grace for the entire world must be allowed to receive full expression.

So the significance of Jesus' remarks is that he knew who he was, he understood what was going to happen to him, and was conscious of what his fate would mean for humanity. Sitting there in the eye of the hurricane, so to speak, he knew that he was the agent of the winds of change and the storm surge of God's plan that would change the world.

And he knew that for his death to mean something, people must accept that he died for their sins to offer eternal life. While it certainly is important to care for the poor out of Christian love, Jesus also was saying that it is essential for people to do, in their own ways, what Mary was doing at that dinner at Lazarus' house.

Mary, in Jesus final days, expressed personal devotion to him because he was physically in the room. We, in the same way, are called to express devotion through the Spirit. Jesus' words in the Gospel showed that he wanted to encourage it then just as he speaks to us through the Spirit now to draw us to him.

VI.

As we approach Palm Sunday next week, we pause today to think about the last moments of peace and quiet that Jesus would have on this earth. His fate already had been sealed by his raising of Lazarus and the Sanhedrin's death sentence. And on the following day he would

boldly re-enter the chaos and turbulence of hopes, expectations, and fears of that Passover week as he humbly but triumphantly entered Jerusalem to go to the cross.

But on this evening in Bethany, resting on the outskirts of Jerusalem, it was different. Jesus and his friends, including even his betrayer, rested and reflected and, in Mary's case, let their hair down. And Mary's unique and selfless expression lives on in Scripture, in all four of the Gospels, as the finest and purest example of faithful discipleship.

So, as this one last dinner party came to an end, history was preparing for the curtain to be raised on the final act of the drama when Jesus departed for Jerusalem.

But as we will see in the next two weeks, it was not the final act but the beginning of God's plan for us through eternity. And as we know from our faith, it was not just a drama but rather creation of the opportunity for us all to live in a personal relationship with God. *Amen.*