

Belief and Memory

Mary of Bethany.

Texts: John 12: 1-8; Mark 14:3-9; Matthew 26:6-13; Luke 7: 36-50

The four Gospels in the New Testament record the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. The Gospel of John differs in many ways from the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke which are known as the Synoptic Gospels. There are similarities and differences in events that were recorded. The texts relating to the anointing of Jesus by a woman is such an example.

Mark 14: 3-9 doesn't give the woman a name.

Matthew 26: 6 –13 doesn't give the woman a name.

Luke 7: 36-50 identifies her as a sinful woman.

John 12: 1- 8 identifies her as Mary of Bethany.

Who was Mary of Bethany?

John is the only Gospel that identifies her as Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. Mary is present with her sister Martha when Jesus visited their home. She is also present at the death of her brother Lazarus. All four writers record the anointing of Jesus as taking place in Bethany. In later years some traditions named Mary Magdalene, who was also named a sinner, as the woman who anointed Jesus. There is no evidence for this assumption.

Retelling the story of Mary of Bethany: What follows is a retelling based on the Biblical narrative. It is a composite rendering based on the accounts in all four Gospels. It is by reading into the silences around events and people in the text that this imagined creative reflection is written.

Mary reflects: There was much chatter in Bethany about our friend Jesus. Some speak of him as a prophet, others as a miracle worker and a few as a teacher. For my sister Martha, my brother Lazarus and myself Jesus was our friend who visited us whenever he travelled through Bethany. We often had table fellowship with him and talked about the many events that were taking place. In recent weeks we became aware of rumours that the leaders in the Temple were planning to arrest him.

It was six days before our Passover when I heard that Jesus was visiting the home of Simon the Pharisee (John.12:1-8). Something prompted me to act. I bought a very expensive alabaster jar filled with fragrant oil and ran to Simon's house. Without a thought I rushed in and stood behind Jesus who was seated at the table with the disciples and some other men. With no hesitation I broke the alabaster jar and poured the oil on Jesus' head. Then I knelt at his feet and let my tears mingle with the oil that had washed over his feet. I had no towel to dry his feet so I used my long hair to dry them. It was a premonition that drove me to act no matter what it would cost me. All I could think of was that I wanted to anoint him before he was arrested and maybe killed.

As I rose the stunned silence in the room was broken. I was accused of being extravagant and thoughtless in wasting such expensive oil. Someone said angrily that it would have been better for me to have sold the alabaster jar and given the money to the poor. The most hurtful word that was thrown at me was that I was a sinful woman who should not have been permitted to use my hair to wipe Jesus' feet. Only prostitutes carried out such acts on men.

I looked into Jesus' eyes. There was no anger or condemnation in them. Instead he spoke to the men at the table. "Simon I have something to say to you." Since the men were still angry, Jesus related a parable about 2 debtors who could not pay their debts. But the creditor cancelled their debt. Jesus asked the question "Which of them would love him more?" (Lk.7:41-42). Simon replied that it would have been the man who had the greater debt cancelled. Jesus said "You always have the poor with you, but will not always have me." (Matt. 26:11).

Jesus then looked at me and said to Simon: "Do you see this woman? I entered your house, you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment." (Lk.7: 44-46). He said he recognized that what I did was not a wasteful act. I was forgiven because it was an act of love. That my sins were forgiven. He then said: "Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her". (Matt: 26:13).

I needed to get home. As I hurried away I wondered what Jesus meant when he said that what I had done would be remembered in memory of me.

PAUSE and reflect:

How would you react if you were criticized for something you did with love? Are there times when you acted despite being advised against such an action?

REFLECTION

Why did Jesus commit the actions of Mary from Bethany for remembrance in the future. Her motives were not coloured by religious, social or economic considerations. It was an act of love that anticipated the death and burial of Jesus.

How would this story be recalled or understood today? Perhaps:

- Once a year at Lent her story would be read in a church. A sermon might be preached.
- An economist may refer to Jesus' words about the poor to write an article on challenges relating to sharing resources and the distribution of wealth.
- A newspaper editor would ask a reporter why he wrote such an insignificant story. It would perhaps be placed in a small column inside a newspaper – if published at all.
- A politician may be tempted to claim the news item as fake news, No creditors would write off 2 debts when there is uncertainty in the money markets.
- Social media would go viral with “unnamed sex worker dares to break social and cultural norms” It would gather momentum across the world with questions such as ‘Who was she?’

Luke's narrative reads that Jesus forgave the woman her sins. There is no indication as to the identity of the woman. What were her sins? Did she love Jesus before Jesus forgave her? Is love the natural outcome to being forgiven?

An act of love and forgiveness was recorded for future generations to read. It found its way into the biblical record as one that would be remembered in memory of Mary of Bethany, where ever the good news was heard.

How often do we hear her story in our churches?

Has she been lost in the memory of the Christian story?

*Thank you God
for making me who I am, and loving me just as I am.*