

Holy Week Begins

Palm Sunday Sermon

John 12:1-19

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Introduction

In verse 16 of our reading we heard this:

At first his disciples did not understand all this.

On one hand the events described in our reading are easy to understand. In a few moments we will go over them and demonstrate this.

On the other hand, the disciples lack of understanding was about substantial meanings deep within the events they neither saw, nor understood. They were in the dark.

This is a common occurrence.

For example, take a wedding ceremony.

As we watch the ceremony we enjoy observing the beauty of the bride; her lovely wedding dress; how handsome the groom is; the sacredness of the surrounding sanctuary; the aroma and attractiveness of the flowers and decorations; and so on.

But deep within the outward ceremony and indicated by the vows - I promise to share with you in whatever happiness or sadness, abundance or want, blessing or adversity that may be a part of our lives.

are two human personalities vowing with their very life energies to enter into each other's lives so completely that no sacrifice will be avoided

The casual observer will not necessarily understand all that means, it will be hidden from them, but in fact it will be the very essence of the wedding.

In the Christian Church outward and visible signs containing inward and hidden meaning, substance, and grace are called sacraments.

Baptism is a sacrament. The Lord's Table is a sacrament. The Church understands that in those outward actions God's grace – his good favor – comes to us in a unique manner. Particularly, in Baptism and the Lord's Table, Christians understand their union with Jesus Christ is explained, exemplified, enhanced and enjoyed.

Furthermore, sacrament also includes an element of commitment; pledge; solemn engagement; the idea of down payment – a concrete offering now for what is believed as promised in the future.

Palm Sunday has sacramental overtones.

All of the events of John 12, occurring over a couple of days: Mary's anointing of Jesus; the donkey ride into Jerusalem; the Greeks coming to see Jesus; the voice from heaven; have deeper meanings attached to them.

But. **At first his disciples did not understand all this.** And not just the disciples, vs 37: **Although Jesus had performed so many signs in their presence, they did not believe in him.** Palm Sunday is a sign to more significant, deeper, meanings. But the meanings are easily missed or misunderstood.

Text

Now, we can be taught and educated in order to understand. However, due to the nature of sacrament which includes this element of commitment and pledge, the best understanding is to be gained through devoted action on our part.

To understand Palm Sunday, the Gospel of John gives us Mary anointing Jesus.

Let's reconstruct the events of those days in order to grasp what Mary does.

It starts with Lazarus, the brother of Mary, dying, buried in the tomb four days, and Jesus who claims to be the resurrection and the life, calling Lazarus to rise up and come out of the tomb.

The impact is instantaneous.

Many more people believed in Jesus.

But, the legislative Council of Jewish leaders met and decided with such actions Jesus would soon draw the attention of the Roman overlords and the subsequent uproar would destabilized the entire nation. They decided on what they believed to be the wisest course of action. The high priest expressed it: . . . **it is better to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.**

Then there was the discipleship group. There are two extreme reactions: Mary's and Judas'.

Mary watched her brother die. She watched him be buried in a tomb. She grieved for four days. She watched Jesus call him, alive, out of the tomb.

She saw in Jesus a living sacrament. In the man Jesus she perceived was also the divine Son of God: the resurrection and the life!

Judas, on the other hand, in the aftermath of the raising of Lazarus from the dead and Mary's extravagant outpouring of honor upon Jesus; Judas, along with the rest of the disciples attacked Mary with the cry of **Why this waste!**

Then Judas took it farther. Seeing the reaction of Jesus to accept this action from Mary rather than address the needs of social justice, reacted himself. Mary's act, became for him, the proverbial 'last straw that broke the camel's back.' Judas decided to betray Jesus to the Jewish authorities – with a sure result of death – in order to right what he perceived as Jesus' wrong.

Two vivid reactions to Jesus' signs: this man must also be God, honor him!; this man is dangerous, put him to death!

When Mary anointed the feet of Jesus with the costly perfume there must have been at least this going through her mind:

Unlike the anointing oil upon a future king or high priest that symbolized God's choice and favor for this individual to serve – the anointing usually being done by a prophet of God

Mary acknowledges she is not anyone special, not authorized to anoint the head of Jesus, but only his feet.

However, as Jesus would say to Peter in a few days upon washing Peter's feet, only the feet need to be washed, the feet touching this fallen world. And the washing demonstrates the one washing and the one being washed have a part in each other.

Mary, on her knees, pouring out the costly perfume and drying Jesus' feet with her hair is an act of profound devotion indicating her complete belonging to Jesus.

And there is more. Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet proclaimed that Jesus was indeed God's anointed Messiah, come to earth to be exactly what he said to Martha, Mary's sister, upon arriving at the tomb of the four-day dead and buried brother Lazarus:

I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.

Upon saying this Jesus asked Martha: **Do you believe this?**

When Mary anoints the feet of Jesus, Mary dramatically says: Yes!

It is this action of Mary's, that John the Gospel writer, tells us is the proper way into which understanding is gained as to what happens when Jesus rides a donkey into Jerusalem.

All the original readers of John's Gospel would have memorized the rest of the paragraph whose opening lines John quoted to explain Jesus' action:

Do not be afraid, Daughter Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt. . . . and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea . . . to the ends of the earth.

Mary gave her entire heart to belong to the Prince of Peace who through his death and resurrection would save her and save God's entire world.

Application

As I said: It is this action of Mary's, that John the Gospel writer, tells us is the proper way into which understanding is gained as to what happens when Jesus rides a donkey into Jerusalem.

Mary's action is a tremendous expression of what later Church Fathers like Augustine and Anselm would articulate as the only way into the knowledge of God:

Credo ut intelligam I believe so that I may understand. Anselm: "I do not seek to understand in order that I may believe, but rather, I believe in order that I may understand."

With the beginning of Holy Week; with Jesus being presented to us as the Humble King; as the washer of feet; as the suffering servant dying upon the Cross for our salvation; as the resurrected Prince of Peace,

the way of understanding is Mary's way; actions of devotion, not simply words, but actions, declaring belief and declaring utter personal commitment even if it were to cost everything

As a rule, Baptists, Mennonites, Reformed, are uncomfortable with such drama as seen with Mary. We are, unfortunately, more prone to be analytical and perhaps even join in with the rest of the disciples who cried out: **Why this waste!**

However, is at this place we have something to learn from our Pentecostal and Charismatic brothers and sisters.

Devotion is based on a careful consideration of the facts:

Mary's brother had died, she knew the facts.

Martha, Mary's sister said Jesus claimed to be the resurrection and the life.

Lazarus was alive.

The half litre of pure nard was tremendously expensive

But having come to the conclusion Jesus was who he claimed to be

Mary charismatically poured out her devotion and service and love upon Jesus. The fragrance of the perfume filled the house.

It is faith alive and it is salvation and it is the way into and through Holy Week.

Amen.