

# Sermons at St Paul's

*A Wellspring of spiritual nourishment; A River of service in Jesus' Name*

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

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## ***In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit***

A few days ago, I realized that a cut on my thumb was not healing as it should have, and pulled out my favorite antibiotic ointment, Neosporin. I hoped that if I put it on the cut overnight under a band-aid, that it would kill the infection. And it did!

I have another, much more expensive ointment that I use. It is Dermal-K, and if I put it on, I hope it will get rid of the dark circles under my eyes. I like to think it works, too.

We use ointments because we hope they work. And that is why an ointment is a powerful tool of healing and health. That is why "anointment" is a powerful expression of hope.

In the Episcopal Church, we anoint the newly baptized with special oil, called "chrism", marking them as Christ's own forever. Chrism is fragrant oil that has been blessed by the bishop during Holy Week for use in anointing. We hope that in this anointing, that this person will be strengthened for God's service, "confess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection, and share in his eternal priesthood."

We also use this fragrant oil, chrism, in our Prayers for Healing. When a priest or pastoral visitor anoints someone ill, they offer this prayer:

*"As you are outwardly anointed with this holy oil, so may our heavenly Father grant you the inward anointing of the Holy Spirit. Of his great mercy, may he forgive you your sins, release you from suffering, and restore you to wholeness and strength. May he deliver you from all evil, preserve you in all goodness, and bring you to everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord."*

Did you hear the powerful words of hope that come with anointing? forgiveness, release, restoration, deliverance, preservation and eternal life? So these oils, these ointments, used in anointing and healing, are substances we really need to pay attention to, aren't they?

With this in mind, let's turn to our readings for today. Let's start with John's Gospel. We hear:

*"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."*

We have heard versions of this story before, in other gospels. The story Luke tells involves a woman who is a stranger, and who expresses her gratitude to Jesus by washing his feet, drying them with her hair, and then anointing his feet. In Mark and Matthew, the anointing seems to point toward Jesus' burial, when (as the story later tells)

there would not be time for the ritual anointing of the dead. But John seems to be giving us this story in a very different way.

Mary has the first century equivalent of a bottle of real French perfume. Nard was highly refined, very fragrant oil that was a semi-solid ointment, sold in small quantities. Body heat would melt it. Some of the wealthy would place a small amount of it on the tops of their heads, where it would slowly melt and perfume their hair, then gradually drip downward until it covered their skin with a fine glaze of scent. It marked the wearer as someone rich and powerful. Someone, most likely, who had a slave to wash their feet, which were inevitably dirty and dusty after walking through unpaved paths and streets. Feet were nearly always dirty in Jesus' time, so they were not the most highly regarded part of the body.

Mary of Bethany, Lazarus' sister, shocks everyone by anointing Jesus' feet with very expensive nard. What on earth is she up to? And a respectable woman did not interrupt the men reclining around the dinner table, much less uncover her head, undo her hair, and wipe a guest's feet like a slave.

Mary! Are you mad? The entire party gasps! Judas protests.

But let's stop and think about what may be going on here. This is not just any Mary. It's Mary who has sat and listened to Jesus for hour upon hour, even to the point of earning Martha's rebuke. This is Mary of Bethany, who was summoned by Jesus to see him call Lazarus out of the tomb. She saw Jesus weep. She heard him call. She saw her brother emerge.

Oh yes, Mary of Bethany is one who understands the relationship of anointing and hope. And she may well be one who understands that the Messiah, the Anointed One, will indeed have to face death, and will triumph over death. You see, Mary listened to everything Jesus had said.

My guess is, that the table talk at this dinner revolved around Jesus' decision to go to Jerusalem for Passover. There may well have been discussion about the danger for him and his disciples. They might well be arrested by the Romans or the Temple authorities for breach of peace or blasphemy if Jesus continued to preach and teach the new Way of God's Kingdom on earth. And Mary listened, realizing with horror that death was a growing and imminent likelihood for her beloved Teacher, the Messiah, the Anointed One. And if death, then burial.

But if death, then hope. As her brother Lazarus had been raised from the dead, so the Messiah would be raised from the dead. She heard him.

She did not speak. That was not her place. But she took a whole pound of nard and anointed the Anointed One. She did not approach his head, which would have been facing the dining table, but only his feet, as he reclined there. If we were telling the story in Greek, we might say that she anointed Christ with chrism. And the whole house was filled with fragrance of the nard. The whole house was filled with the scent of hope.

This is what the passages from Isaiah and Philippians are pointing toward. Hey, says Isaiah, The Lord is about to do a new thing; it is already springing forth – do you not perceive it? Listen, Says Paul, forget what lies behind and strain for what lies ahead: the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Today we stand just days away from the palms and remembrance of that Passover dinner, from Jesus' passion and death. We like, Paul, are invited to journey with Jesus. He tells the Philippians of his hope:

*“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.*

Do you desire to be anointed with hope? Do you want to lead a resurrected life, and are you willing to walk with Jesus through the days of Holy Week, prayerfully and in trust?

Jesus came to give us that hope, to anoint us with a perfume that makes our souls fragrant to God. Jesus came to give us more life, not more death. Let us walk in that knowledge during the next twelve days!

***Amen.***