

## **“The radical change” John 12:1-8**

**Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table.**

**Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.**

**But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it.**

**Jesus said, "Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me." (John 12:1-8)**

Grace and peace to you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

As Easter is approaching so also our Gospel readings are leading us closer to those events which took place shortly before Holy Week. Today we read about what happened on the Saturday evening before Palm Sunday.

This event is described by three of the four evangelists; by Matthew, Mark and John. Luke has a similar event in his Gospel, but it probably took a place on different occasion.

What can we conclude when we see that this event has been described by three of the four evangelists? At least this one thing; it was significant enough to be told to all those who listened to the Gospel of Jesus Christ then, and is still just as significant for us, today.

I have to admit, when I read it, it is anything but clear why should this event be included in these gospels? I can say even more; if you try to understand what was happening on this evening, it becomes even more obscure. Many of these

events we can understand only when we know the whole story. However, there is something in this event that is not just significant, but really life-changing.

Let us look together at what we can find out about it.

In the previous chapter we read, how Jesus, before the eyes of many, raised from the dead his friend Lazarus, who had been in a grave already for four days. This event shook the entire neighbourhood. Many began to believe in Jesus.

Martha and Mary were sisters of Lazarus. As we can read in Luke 10, and also described in these verses, Martha was a very responsible and hardworking person. Even before Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, she confessed that 'Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.' (John 11:27 ESV)

About Mary, the sister of Martha, we know that she always listened to Jesus very carefully. While Martha was busy preparing a meal, Mary tried to spend every moment listening to Jesus' words. On that evening everyone, including the disciples of Jesus, were together in the house of Simon.

When everyone was lying to enjoy the meal 'Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.' (John 12:3 NIV)

To see something like this would be strange for our eyes, of course. But it was strange also for those present in that room. John reports that Judas objected to what had happened complaining that such an expensive oil had been wasted. Maybe he was right. The amount of money mentioned here is 300 denarii.

If we remember the parable about the workers in a vineyard from the gospel of Matthew, chapter 20, each of them earned 1 denarii per day. That was an average wage per one day. John is now talking about 300 denarii, which were just poured out on Jesus feet. Let us put it this way, - it was an average salary for one year. So, what can we think about it?

Jesus didn't object to what happened. Quite the contrary; He endorsed what Mary has done and as we read in the other gospel accounts, He even said that wherever this Gospel will be proclaimed what Mary did will be announced. Today we know that it has happened exactly as Jesus predicted.

Many of the Gospel events seem strange not just for those outside of the Church, but even to us. What is Mary doing? And the most important question; why is she doing it?

Maybe it will help if we look at a couple more passages. Let's take a look at two people whose stories we know from the Bible. The first one, according to any standards, we can call a serious sinner. Second, perhaps, is the example of the righteous and good person.

In Luke 7 we read that Jesus is invited into the house of one of the Pharisees. "When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them. (Luke 7:37-38 NIV)

What did this Pharisee think about that: "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is--that she is a sinner." (Luke 7:39 NIV)

This woman, as we can understand from the text and as the Church tradition tells, may have been a prostitute in her town. Not just an average person, but an outcast. Now with these actions she is making a public confession that she is leaving her previous occupation. What has caused such a radical change? What boldness; to enter this house, full of righteous Pharisees, and with this impressive act express her thanks to Jesus!

What has caused this boldness? We know the answer. Her encounter with Jesus, or more precisely, Jesus' message, these few simple words; "I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven" ... "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." (Luke 7:47-1 NIV)

When we are burdened by what we have done, and we hear Jesus pronouncing these words, then our entire life is changed. These words as we see them in the Bible again and again, have an enormous power. They change everything. I was guilty, but now I am forgiven. They turn our values, our lives have been completely transformed. By these words we are renewed, restored and made ready for a fresh start.

Yes, one could object, that she was not a very nice person; she was a prostitute and, of course, forgiveness would change her life entirely. It is a fact, that most of us live a different kind of life. What have we to do with this example? If we think that this example doesn't speak to us, let's take a look at another example.

These are words from the letter to Philipians, where apostle Paul describes himself: "Circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless."

To translate it into our contemporary situation we would see a man living in a prosperous country and from a wealthy family with great connections; one who has a high status in the society, one who has enjoyed the best possible education, one who is a highly regarded person in the society because of his moral standing and faultless life. Who wouldn't want all of that? That sounds almost like a dream.

Now listen to this: "But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ." (Phi 3:5-8 NIV)

We can definitely see the logic of the woman who was a sinner, but what about the apostle Paul? If she was at the lowest end of the society, Paul was at the highest.

When Jesus meets us, the first thing He does is to forgive us all for what we have done wrong, and he purifies us from everything that was done wrong to us. But this is not the end of the story. This is just the beginning.

He makes us citizens of His kingdom, of His eternal kingdom, where not just total wellbeing is granted to everyone, but where justice, peace and joy comes from the very presence of God. He not only makes us citizens of His kingdom, He also grants us the highest possible worth and respect; He makes us children of His Father. We can call eternal, almighty God our Father, and we can be sure that He listens to what we are saying to Him. He gives us freedom. The freedom to be, what we are created to be. When He, the Lord of life, meets us, when He shows us the riches, which He wants to give us by His sheer grace and not because we

deserve them, then we are freed from this need of trying to justify our existence, our importance, and our goodness.

When we learn about Him, our hearts are changed. All these gifts of God and His love wash away the sin from our hearts. The more we hear about what He does for us, the purer our hearts become. Then we are enabled to focus on others, instead of focusing on ourselves.

He gives us freedom to live striving to follow not what world expects us to do, to live not for status, for respect, for good name, but to live for others, as Jesus did for us.

Everyone knows that we are ready to pay a lot for the thing which we trust will bring us self-esteem, respect, joy, happiness, meaning and love. We are ready to pay for them with our money, our time, our honour, with all our resources ... and yes, even with our lives!

This is exactly what the sinful woman apostle Paul and Mary and the sister of Lazarus, did. It doesn't make a sense if we are looking at it with the eyes of this world. Even the disciples objected. What a waste? 300 denarii – a wage for 300 days! We may think of the money as means for prosperity, or security, or power and influence, as means to acceptance and happiness. Mary didn't think in these categories. She already got it all for free, from our Lord Jesus Christ. She had found the treasure of treasures. She had found that when you love the true God more than anything, you actually have everything you may ever need, and even much more.

Mary didn't think in categories of what can we do with this money. She has heard the Gospel from Christ Himself, she was a witness to the fact that Jesus Himself is the resurrection and the life. She knew that Jesus brings us the Kingdom of God, something much larger than we can ever dream about.

Sinful women didn't think in these categories. Paul didn't think in these categories. And each of us have moments in our life, when we don't think in these categories. When we realize that everything we have and that everything we are, that these are gifts from our gracious God, who gave Himself that we may live, then we don't measure our joy, respect, security, worthiness with money, we measure it with presence of Jesus. If we have Him, we have all we need.

There are moments when the Holy Spirit moves us and tells us to do something that according to the wisdom of this world looks foolish. Besides, good things which we do won't be told wherever the Gospel is proclaimed as it is with the story of Mary that we heard today.

But they will still be remembered, and not just here. As we read in Matthew: "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. [...] Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.. etc. [...] Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we do this?'" [...] And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.' (Mat 25:31-40 ESV)

He will remember what you have done for your neighbour and he'll praise and reward you for it.

When Jesus meets us, whoever we are, sinners or righteous people in the eyes of the society, we are changed. Seeing what He has done for us, we realize that we have lived not for others, but for ourselves. Then we are freed, the culture doesn't anymore set standards to which we have to submit, if we want to be respected, envied, considered as worthy persons. Our Father in Heaven not only forgives our sins, but also gives all of these things and much more as a gift. As loving Father to His beloved children.

We are used thinking that Jesus showed what God is like. Yes, that's true. But He also showed what a man is like according to God's design. When we understand that *things*, which the world is trying to get so hard, we receive as gifts from our Father, we are freed to live for others. It doesn't mean that we need to change the world, or to do something equally important. No, as Jesus said, 'whatever you have done to one of these brothers and sisters, whatever you have done living for the good of those people, which God has sent into your life, that you have done for me.'

May He bless us, that His grace changes also our life and frees us to serve one another.

Amen.