

Sunday, March 25, 2007
Given by the Rev. M. Peter Harer

Lent 5C

Our gospel lesson today from John's gospel is a made for TV docudrama. All of the characters in the story are familiar to us. We remember the two sisters, Martha and Mary, from the previous episode in the famous story in Luke's gospel in which Jesus is invited to dinner at the two sisters' house. Martha (whom we can only guess was the elder sister—hints here maybe of the parable of the Prodigal Son from last week where it was the elder brother who was the responsible and reliable one of the two brothers) slaves away in the kitchen getting dinner ready, while the younger sister, Mary, sits in the den at Jesus' feet gazing dreamily into his eyes and hanging on his every word. You may also recall that Martha, who is up to her elbows in French onion soup and roast duck, gets fed up with Mary's perceived laziness and scolds her in front of Jesus for not helping to prepare the meal. As in the parable of the Prodigal Son, the older of the two sisters comes off looking like the uptight and stingy one when Jesus tells Martha that Mary is just fine right where she is.

Now in today's lesson from John's gospel, Jesus is back at the home of Martha and Mary also sharing a meal. Chances are, John knew about the story in Luke's gospel about Jesus' meal with Martha and Mary and elaborates on it in his version of the story. This time there are some added

features to the story. The first thing is that Jesus' visit comes just after he has performed the amazing feat of raising Martha's and Mary's brother Lazarus from the dead. Luke doesn't mention Lazarus in his version of the story. The second thing is that John tells us that while Martha prepares the meal (no surprise there) Mary is in the den with Jesus (no surprise there either). But then John adds the rather juicy little tidbit that at one point, Mary pulls out a jar of expensive ointment from Lord and Taylor's and pours the entire jar on Jesus' feet and massages it in with her hair. As a result, the entire house is filled with the fragrance of the expensive ointment called nard. Clearly, Mary is interested in more than just Jesus' views on the tax increases announced from Rome in that morning's Times-Leader.

The next interesting little twist that John adds to the story is that Judas Iscariot somehow is present at the dinner party at Martha and Mary's house. This time it is Judas, not Martha, who scolds Mary. He complains to Mary and to Jesus about how wasteful this extravagant gesture of Mary's is. He laments that the ointment could have been sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor through the Millennium Development Goals. John then adds the editorial comment that Judas doesn't really care about the poor because he is really a thief. But could it also be that Judas is actually jealous of Jesus? Is Mary's affection for Jesus the real reason that Judas

betrayed Jesus? We shall never know. In any case, Jesus reassures Judas that Mary's use of the ointment to anoint his feet is not at all wasteful because she bought it for the day of his burial.

It does us no good to speculate as to how Mary would know that Jesus was soon to be arrested, sentenced to death, and executed. Instead, John uses this story to point to the inevitable fact of Jesus' death. In fact much of John's gospel points to the eventual reality that Jesus, the incarnate word of God made flesh, is to die a criminal's death on a cross. Indeed, the world that Jesus came to save would ultimately reject him, mistreat him and crucify him. It is ironic that this should be so, but it is the supreme irony of history as John sees it.

For many people, Jesus' death is not the supreme irony, but the supreme stumbling block. The Apostle Paul talks about this when he says in First Corinthians that the cross of Christ is a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks. Indeed, if I were to set out to invent a religion, I would not invent one that says that God became a man who taught that we should love God and our neighbors, and then have other men hate that man so much that they arrested him on false charges and put him to death. This is not the sort of religion that would seem to appeal to a lot of people. First

of all it's kind of gruesome, and secondly, just as real men don't eat quiche, so real God's don't die.

Yet no one ever claimed that our Christian faith is logical, consistent or conforms to the rules of common sense. I doubt that anyone was ever persuaded by rational argument to become a Christian. Nor does a person wake up one morning and say, "I think I will invent a religion today that is scientifically provable and logical." Rather, religions arise out of the common experience of a group of people who sense that God, the sacred or the divine is somehow present in what they see, hear or do. And so it was with Jesus of Nazareth. His followers, including Martha's sister Mary, had no way to explain the impact Jesus had on them. Yet just as Mary knew that it was not a waste of money to take a jar of expensive ointment and pour it on Jesus' feet, so the rest of his followers knew that a cross, a crown of thorns and a grave were not the end of the one they called "Lord."

The world would tell us that real Gods don't die. Yet in the face of Jesus Christ we see one who's suffering and death defied the wise and clever of the world. In his rejection by the world and his suffering and death at the world's hands, Jesus walked the path that sooner or later we all will have to walk. In the space of the week just past, I have had to minister to two of our most faithful parishioners and a former rector in their time of pain and

suffering. All three of them have faced their trials with great dignity. But I think they were able to do so to a large extent because they knew that their Lord had been down the same path, experienced the same uncertainty and borne the same cross as they did. That's the God that we Christians worship—the one who suffers and dies. I can't think of a God more real or more worthy of worship than that.