

In the Synoptic Gospel (Mark & Matthew) it is in the house of Simon the Leper that Jesus is anointed with expensive scent, spontaneously by a woman who appears in the house mysteriously - and Jesus says in both places that what she has done will *be remembered and announced along with the Gospel wherever it is preached*.

In the Fourth Gospel the scene is much more precise and pointed. This dinner party is one of the most powerful assemblies in the Gospel record. The raising of Lazarus, says John, has sealed the death warrant of Jesus. He has to be stopped, as his signs are beginning to spell the end of the way Israel is run; something final is to be contrived to stop the Gospel in its tracks.

The presence at the table not only of the two sisters who so powerfully spoke to Jesus before his last great Johannine sign, but of Lazarus, who had spent four days in the tomb, lends the dinner an almost surreal quality. But Mary is the central figure. She brings forth from some hidden place this sensational treasure, the spikenard, whose dizzying perfume is to be poured out on the feet of the Messiah in an act of total abandon. This is not a simple honouring of a beloved friend. It is an anointing whose cost is breathtaking, and whose generosity silences most of those who are present; not that they see it, but that they sense it with their noses. Scent has the power to silence us like nothing else. The echoing of his death and, very finally, his burial, reveals what is in the mind of Mary. She received her brother from the grave, no doubt, with gratitude and joy; but her fears for Jesus who had come to them so late, and yet had transformed their mourning, overshadows the joy. Lazarus, after all, will die again. But she knows that Jesus too has finally entered Judaea, where his death is almost certain; and in his usual way he is doing nothing to defend himself. They all feel that they are in their last days with him, and they know nothing of the Paschal transition which is his true destiny.

Today is a day for us to bring all our fears and all our grief to the Paschal furnace which is being stoked against the events of this Holy Week. We have heard all the words, we have perhaps read books about the Resurrection. But all of this study and thought can never replace the passage Jesus traces for us, and our faithful following of him, remaining with him on this courageous journey, as he is lifted up to the Father. All sacrifice, all love, and all faithfulness will be accomplished in him. Let them be accomplished in us too, so that we may come to know the love of Christ, which is beyond all knowledge, and be scented with the sanctity which makes this the holiest of weeks.