

At the risk of boring those who may have read the Back of the Bulletin, I'd like you to imagine the scene at this dinner-party very exactly: the guests all lying on a series of low couches, whose heads converge at a low table on which the food is served. The extraordinary woman who makes the dinner so unusual is outside the circle of guests, and is doing all sorts of strange things at Jesus' feet. It is quite clear that such meals were often served semi-publicly, in the courtyards of houses open to the street. The reaction of the host is to pretend that nothing is happening, but this must have grown rather difficult to do, with their senses assaulted on all fronts: the sight of the unbraided hair used as a towel, the mixture of sobs and kisses resounding in their ears, and the sudden onrush of scent as she spills the alabaster jar onto his feet. What is the Church asking us to hear in this story?

Pharisees are often derided and insulted as hypocrites and knaves. They provide a sort of anti-Semitic shooting-gallery for sincere Christians, who like to distance themselves from such openly dishonest religion. This is a result of history: when the priests and lawyers of the Jewish establishment were all swept away in AD 70, as Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans, Judaism went into a state of shock in which all sorts of wretched things happened. The Christians were excommunicated by the remaining leaders, most of whom were Pharisees. They became the rabbis, who led the devastated Jews, now scattered and disinherited, and enabled them to survive as a community.

But it was at this very time that the Gospels were being written. In a Church which was at war with Pharisees, it was inevitable that they would be depicted in the Gospels as the great opposition to Jesus - although in fact Jesus had much sympathy with Pharisees, and he was crucified by the priests and scribes, who did not. So let us not embark on a further denunciation of Pharisees as we read this Gospel. Let's notice, instead, *what Jesus says to us*. We Catholics are habitually like the host at this dinner. We follow the Pharisaic pattern, and try to stay apart from the sin and corruption of the world we live in; we deplore its crimes and derelictions, and separate ourselves mentally from much of its values. Nevertheless, we are up to our necks in the world we profess to deplore, and implicated in its crimes; we take our share of unjustly-acquired wealth and our special safety-zone in a world dying of neglect and injustice. When affliction enters our life, our religious attitudes suddenly weaken, and we find ourselves taking the same short-cuts and fixes as people who have no faith.

It is in the intimacy of our hearts that we are witnessing one of the most surprising and upsetting collapses. Catholics used to have a reputation for scrupulous morality, which expressed itself in honest self-examination and then confession. We were thought of as people who didn't try to evade our responsibility for sin and failure. In some ways this quality was passed on in ways we cannot approve. People used to be made to feel guilt, and frightened by talk of punishment; such a morality can be entirely devoid of real religion, and be nothing except an abusive structure of self-hatred. But go back to the dinner. Jesus knows that what is happening in the exterior darkness, at the other end of his couch, and frankly he thinks better of it than he does of the attention his head is receiving up front. The woman is clearly in love with him, and she is breaking her heart and pouring it out in equal measure, because she knows her state of life will prevent her from approaching him in any normal way. In this she represents all of us. The Pharisee is just as incapable of reaching Jesus, because he is reserved, afraid, completely introverted, turned in on himself. He has big problems if he is ever to be swept up into the eternal love of God. Not so the woman. If an archangel arrived for her, it would seem to be quite in order; she has nothing left to cling to, her hands are empty, she would be all ready to go. You see, despite her grief at the mess she's made of her life, she hasn't forgotten joy, and she hasn't despaired of love. To realise the distance between us and the glory of God is essential. The life we're living now isn't the final thing. We have to weep over it, not try to patch it up and hang a few flowers on it. But in our sorrow there is joy that God comes to us and awakens desire in us for what is true, and good, and real. *That's* what's worth breaking the alabaster jar for.