

## The Man Who Kept the Lord's Purse

By Dr. Dave Neale

The emotional landscape is intense for us over the next two weeks. We are in the fifth week of Lent and find ourselves in a rather dark place with our John 12 text today, a very appropriate text for reflection this week. Next week is Palm Sunday, a mix of triumph and dread, then Holy Week, Good Friday and the victorious celebration of Easter. It is the most emotional and profound two weeks of the Christian calendar.

And indeed, our passage today occurs **Six days before Passover**. So the timing is perfect for us... we are seven days from the entry into Jerusalem. And this message today has a sombre Lenten feel to it. Let us allow ourselves to reflect on the coming sorrow.

Our story from John today occurred in the extraordinary scene of a dinner party at the house of Lazarus, not long since he had been raised from the dead by Jesus.

It is a story in which we find, on the one hand an extraordinary display of reverence by Mary, and on the other hand the appalling sinful corruption of one of the Twelve, Judas Iscariot.

Let's observe for a moment where our passage sits in John.

### Slide #1 How the Story Unfolds in John

- Lazarus raised, and this is a precipitating crisis for the "chief priests and Pharisees," as John describes them. **If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.** (John 11:1-44, 48)
- The plot to kill Jesus emerges in response to Lazarus' resurrection (John 11:45-57) **So from that day on planned to put him to death** (v 57)
- The dinner at Lazarus' home (John 12:1-8)
- Plot to kill Lazarus (John 12:9-11)

Can we see how the descent to Holy Week and the death of Jesus begins in earnest in these weeks leading up to Passover.

### Slide #2 The Dinner in the Home of Lazarus

- Guests: Jesus, who had retreated into the wilderness after raising Lazarus, has returned to Bethany, Lazarus, Mary, Martha, Judas/Satan
- Mary anoints Jesus with expensive perfume
- Judas complains that it should have been sold because he saw an opportunity to pocket the money

*Mary knew everything was at the tipping point in their lives.*

She must have been wealthy in order to spend a year's wages on the perfume. Jesus says she bought it for **...the day of his burial** (v 7). I don't know that she planned on using it at the dinner, so it has the feel of a spontaneous act of worship. **The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume** (v 3b).

Do you remember the other woman in Luke, a **woman in the city... a sinner...who stood behind him at this feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and dry them with her hair** (Lk 7:36ff).

What was the meaning of foot washing? In the OT those who entered presence of God in the sanctuary were required to wash their feet; it sanctified the person and opened them to the manifestation of God.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps Mary was preparing the Lord for his coming weeks and the work of God that was to come. I think our Mary knew.

*Judas knew...*

As I reflected on this I found myself becoming so sad that the man who kept the Lord's purse was betraying by stealing Him from it. His treasurer was embezzling. It just makes me so sad.

I think he knew perfectly well that he was going to betray Jesus. The arrangements for the betrayal were almost certainly already set in train. Judas knew.

During one period of our retirement we were living in a small town with a lovely Methodist church where we attended. And it became known later that a perfectly respectable couple, a couple we all liked well enough, a couple who lived in a nice home, who annually ran the money table at the annual church garage sale were pocketing a good deal of the money. How can that be?

It's not just a betrayal of the Lord's purse, from which he was stealing, which is appalling enough. It was his willingness to betray the Lord's life to the authorities. It's not in John, but in Matthew we learn that it was for 30 pieces of silver (Matt 26:15).

We'll never be able to understand **why** he did this, but some say there were also ulterior political motives. The meaning of his name, 'Iscaiot' may point toward a possible association with the Sicarii, "dagger-wielding assassins" (*The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol 3, p. 1091). Maybe you have seen the modern movie series *Sicario* with Emily Blunt and Josh Brolin.

*Jesus knew...*

Jesus chose Judas. "**Did I not choose you, the twelve? Yet one of you is a devil.**" (Jn 6:70)

Jesus quoting the fulfilment of the prophecy of Ps 41:9, knows the nature of what he faces with Judas, **The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me** (Jn 13:18). He was **deeply troubled in spirit... 'One of you will betray me.'** (Jn 13:21) Jesus knew but the disciples did not. **The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking** (Jn 13:26). Peter leaned over and asked Jesus who it was, and he said watch to whom I give this bread... **So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscaiot...And Satan entered into him...** (Jn 13:26)

"Betrayer" means one who hands someone over to the authorities. I think "traitor" isn't far from the mark in our current language (see John 13:2, 26; 18:2-5). There was a traitor at the dinner table that evening.

And yet, it's this man to whom he gives the purse of the group.

Jesus doesn't rebuke Judas. Nowhere does he castigate him, or abuse him or 'out' him. How can you have a betrayer in your midst and love him? How can you love those who hate you? Jesus did...

He only says, ***Do quickly what you are going to do*** (Jn 13:27. This is the man who brings a ***detachment of temple soldiers and police to deliver Jesus to the chief priests and Pharisees.*** (Jn 18:3)

### From the Text

So what are we to make of this scene and what does it teach us about life and love for God?

One lesson is cautionary. As with Judas, the dangers of greed and calculating self-will are our warning.

And when Judas rebukes Mary for her extravagance with the perfume Jesus just says to him, ***O leave her alone, you'll always have the poor but you won't always have me here.*** (Jn 12:7-8)

[Musicians]

This morning we learn the gift of generosity from dear Mary. Maybe you have found it as heartening as I have, that in "the last two weeks people from 165 countries have booked more than 430,000 nights at Ukrainian homes on Airbnb with no intention of using the rooms" obviously (CBC, March 16, 2022). How can we also renew our commitment to the open-handed generosity of Mary?

I think another take-away from the text today is one of somber reflection on the next two weeks to come before that glorious Easter morning. Like the dinner at Lazarus' house, we will sit here in the candlelight of an intimate evening, knowing that the tipping point has come, that for a time evil will have its sway. But that the Lord is with us.

We also learn from Mary's veneration, her adoration of the Lord. We learn from Mary's holy reverence for Jesus and the surpassing intimacy of her act; her loyalty to the Lord, her recognition of his divinity I'd like to think.

There is a need in life the adoration of our Lord. That is really what worship is. So we come, metaphorically at least, to bring our most precious of possessions and sit at the feet of the Lord, to show Him how we feel.

This morning as we come to a song we know well, and before Pastor Ron leads us in Communion, I invite you all to stand, and bring your hearts to Jesus, and allow this sanctuary to be filled with the fragrance of His presence.

Please remember that in spite of it all, Jesus told his disciples, ***Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Don't let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.*** (Jn 14:27)

Thanks be to God.

**Benediction: And now may the Lord who bade us be at peace, who gave us His peace, lift the troubles and fear from you hearts and bring you rejoicing into his presence today and in the week to come!**

**In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen**

<sup>1</sup> In one later tradition (4<sup>th</sup> century) a Pharisee was said to have challenged Jesus and his disciples for not washing their feet before entering the temple precincts (*Anchor Study Bible*, vol 2, p 828)