

## The Anointing of Christ

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So now we are at the very end of Lent. It's a serious time in the church calendar, and so this message may be quite serious, kind of deep. I thought I would at least share a couple of Lent "Dad" jokes before diving in. Sadly, you may have heard some of these, so forgive me!

A man took his young son to a baseball game. While they were sitting there, he asked the boy what he was going to give up for Lent. The boy replied, "I don't know, Dad. What are you going to give up?" His father said, "I've thought about this a lot and decided to give up liquor." Later in the game, the beer man came by, and the man ordered a beer. His son objected, "Hey, I thought you were giving up liquor!" His dad answered, "Hard liquor, son. I'm giving up hard liquor. This is just a beer." To which the boy replied, "Well then, I'm giving up hard candy."

A man walked into a Catholic church, outside of mass hours and found the priest. He pulled out a gun and said, "Give me everything you have." The priest panicked and desperately searched his pockets. He didn't have any money on him, but he found several pieces of wrapped candy, which he held out and said, "I'm sorry. This is all I have!" The robber replied in shock, "But Father, I gave up candy for Lent!"

Once during Lent a faithful parishioner stumbled through pouring rain, passing hamburger huts and steak houses. He asked for shelter at a monastery and was just in time for dinner. He was treated to the best fish and chips he's ever had. After dinner, he went into the kitchen to thank the chefs. He saw two of the brothers and thanked them, saying, "The fish and chips were the best I've ever tasted. Out of curiosity, who cooked what?" The first brother replies, "Well, I'm the fish friar." The man turns to the other brother and says, "Then you must be..." "Yes, I'm afraid I'm the chip monk."

That's probably enough for now. Hopefully that gets you ready to dive into this week's subject. Lent is typically a time for reflection, and yes, even sorrow. As I speak today, I want you to remember one thing: Easter is coming! Isaiah spoke to us of a new thing that God is doing. It will bring great joy, but not without hard and terrible things coming to pass. Yes, we're finishing Lent, and next week, we

will celebrate and remember the triumphal entry of Christ into Jerusalem. Yet even then our joy will be tempered with the knowledge of what is to come. Jesus knows full and well what He is walking, well, riding into. He will undergo the greatest suffering that anyone on earth has ever experienced. But don't forget – Easter is coming.

Let's rewind to a bit before Christ's entry into Jerusalem. He is at dinner in Bethany, a small town not far from Jerusalem, maybe just two miles away. Other gospels tell us that this took place at the home of Simon the leper, possibly a relative of Lazarus. Lazarus himself, recently raised from the dead by Jesus, is at the dinner, and his sister Martha is serving. And something amazing, even something terribly scandalous, comes to pass. The younger sister of Lazarus, Miriam (or Mary) brings in an incredibly expensive gift for Jesus. Judas says it might be worth three hundred denarii. One denarius was a day's wages for a laborer, in today's money, let's say one hundred fifty dollars. That would make this ointment worth about forty-five thousand dollars.

What was this expensive stuff? It was about twelve ounces, three quarters of a pound of nard. This word "nard" was borrowed from Sanskrit – a language from India. It was made from the juice of the head or spike of a fragrant East Indian plant. Think about it! India was a long, long journey from Israel, and it would have taken many weeks for it to be brought there. We are further told that it was pure. Nard was often mixed with other things – but not this time. John uses the word *pistikos* to say how pure. This Greek word has the same root as *pistis*, which we translate as faith, assurance, belief, fidelity. In other words, we are being told that not only was this ointment pure nard, but it was certifiable as pure, and we can be assured of it – no question about it.

In the other gospel accounts, we are told that Mary broke the jar, ensuring that there would be none left over. And she anointed the feet of Jesus, liberally smearing the stuff all over them. She wiped his feet with her hair. Listen to this – first, it was considered immodest for a woman to be around men with her head uncovered, her hair showing – much less touching a man with her hair! Second, feet were considered some of the most unclean parts of the body – with good reason, given that everyone walked in the same dust that animals trod in, seasoning it with their dung. This is why people then generally washed their feet

prior to entering a home. And yet Mary let her hands and hair come into contact with this filth. She would have had it imbedded in her hair! Not to mention Jesus allowing a woman to whom He was not married touch Him like this. How scandalous!

Now let's look at how two men responded to Mary. We first have Judas, who will betray Jesus in mere days. Now remember, Judas had been a member of the twelve for a long time. He was there when Jesus sent them out two by two to preach the kingdom, heal the sick, and cast out demons. And Judas did all those things! But he was now in a different place. While he tried to appear shocked that the money was not put to better use, we are told that he was angry that he did not have access to that money. He was looking out for what would be good for him, and him alone, not the poor as he indicated. But Jesus, understanding Mary's intent, rebuked Judas.

Jesus tells those at dinner that Mary had anointed Him for His burial. He knew full well what was coming. The greater anointing that Jesus would endure in the coming week was so much more. He would be immersed, smeared as an ointment might be, you could say, with unimaginable torture, pain, death – suffering. But He also knew – Easter was coming.

Paul tells us more about this in the passage from Philippians we read this morning. He could have, like Judas, been thinking of his own person, being selfish with his accomplishments and who he was. After all, he was a highly trained Pharisee who had “religiously” followed the law. He was a Jew's Jew. But no, he counted all of that as a complete washout – a total loss. Nothing was more important to him than to be associated with and to know and be known by Jesus. One of my favorite verses in the Bible is here, which I will quote a little differently than it was read earlier: “That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death (!), that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” This word fellowship (or sharing in, as the English Standard Version says) is from a Greek word you are likely familiar with – *koinonia*. It means to fellowship, communion with, jointly participate with, be intimate with. Paul is literally saying that he wants to be an intimate partner with Christ in all His suffering. Whoa boy! He wants to be like Him in death! The word translated “to be like (Him)” is

*symmorphizō*. Sim – as in similar, and morphed, morphed into death like Jesus! Paul is saying he is to be in the same form as Jesus, rendered like Him in His suffering and death. And yes, that he might attain the resurrection. Paul already knew – Easter is coming!

This anointing of Christ – suffering – is expensive, and difficult. Like the jar Mary broke, it cannot be taken back. The perfume will never be put back in its container. It is a strange thing for us to be called to identify with this anointing of suffering, yet that is what Christ is calling us to do. This anointing is our gift as well – Jesus liberally spread the sweet perfume of His suffering and death all over us. Again, how scandalous this is! The ugliness of His suffering, the ignominy of His death, is far more precious than pure nard! His pain and loss were starkly pure gifts to us. It does not come from what we try to beg, steal or borrow, nor does it come from our accomplishments or our background.

And we are called to share in this suffering. What does that mean? It must soak into us. We count our gain as loss – pure rubbish. We model His behavior in the midst of His passion – humble, giving ourselves up to the suffering readily. If we must take this on, how can we bear it?

We look forward to resurrection, to eternal life with Christ. But resurrection cannot happen without death – it is required. Our lives may have many terrible things that happen – loss of loved ones, disease, financial trouble, family strife – you name it. Christians all over the world are facing oppression and even martyrdom. Our friends in Pakistan recently told us of a young man killed for his faith. And yet, I'm speaking of something even more. We are called to fully identify with Christ in all aspects. Our upward goal is to become more like Him every day. We must be prepared to encounter pain and even terror like He did.

I know that this is a hard message, but it is real. The good news is that it goes hand in hand with the rest of the story. We know that the Jesus who endured death on a cross also irrevocably defeated death in His resurrection. We know that in spite of any suffering we can look forward to great joy. Do not be afraid, little children. Do not fear but look up to your Redeemer! There is nothing in the path we must tread that He has not already traversed before us.

The anointing of Christ, His suffering, is sweet yet difficult. But let us look at it the same way Jesus did, looking for that which He bought, and the victory to come. I say again, do not fear, my brothers and sisters. Remember – Easter is coming!

Amen.