

**Rev. Kevin V. Madigan**  
**Church of St. Thomas More, NYC**  
**March 28, 2021      Streaming Mass**  
**Palm Sunday 2021**

It is certainly easier to be alone by oneself, than to endure the feeling of solitude alone in a crowd. It is easier to be alone with one's grief, to go off by oneself, to close the door and cry alone over some disappointment, rejection, frustration or loss, than to have to look around at faces that just don't understand, or worse, are unwilling to comprehend. In St. Mark's rendering of the Passion, Jesus is always surrounded by crowds of people. Yet, whatever it is that is happening around Him, Jesus is always essentially alone. From the beginning of the week when the streets of Jerusalem are crowded with people, hoping that He will be their new King David and will restore Israel to its former glory, to that fateful Friday when the crowds again come out watch as Jesus is led to His execution, there is no one who seems able to understand what He is about. Even His closest friends, His disciples, still don't have a clue.

Through it all, through the cheers, through the jeers, through the hosannas and through the curses, Jesus is alone. He knows that their political expectations will only lead to disaster, and He is fully aware that the message he preached of a new way for people to relate to God and to each other, a way that would abolish society's endless round of hierarchies, discriminations and exclusions, this new way, this way He called the Reign of God, would lead inevitably to His death. The religious, political and economic elites will soon enough perceive that their vested interests will not be able to tolerate One who's teaching would undermine their power and privilege.

Jesus is alone, but not completely. There is someone who emerges from the crowd and who comprehends what He is about, and who supports Him in his hour of need. That is the woman who at the house of Simon anoints the head of Jesus with very expensive, aromatic ointment. She says nothing, but that single gesture is proof enough that she is aware of who He really is, and of what will soon enough be done to Him. She pours the precious oil on His head; she anoints Him. In Hebrew, the word "Messiah " means the "anointed." In Greek, the word "Christos" or "Christ" likewise means the "anointed" one. The woman's action could be taken as a symbolic announcement of Jesus' status as the Christ, but the Christ who will suffer and die. Jesus gives a fuller interpretation of what her

gesture means what He says of her, "She has anointed my body beforehand for its burial." She understands what none of the others could comprehend. She gets it.

It is the woman's gesture that is a wordless affirmation of Jesus' true identity, that His role as Messiah is one that leads not to conquest, but to death. Jesus says that because of her insight, because of her intuition into the mystery of who He really is, "wherever the Gospel is preached what she has done will be proclaimed in memory of her."

While her gesture meets with praise from the lips of Jesus, she finds reproach and censure from the lips of the crowd of onlookers. They say she has wasted the precious ointment, that it could have been sold and the proceeds, almost a year's wages for most workers, given to the poor. Jesus says rather surprisingly, "The poor you will always have with you, (meaning, you can be generous to them whenever you wish), but you will not always have Me. She has done what was in her power to do." Are the words of Jesus a rather glib dismissal of the seemingly legitimate complaints of those at table with them? Or is Jesus suggesting, that while helping the poor is a constant requirement for those who wish to be His disciples, it does not substitute for personal acts of love and kindness for individuals in a moment of particular need? And, at this moment, it is Jesus himself who is in need of solace and support. To give money to benefit the poor, but to refuse to comfort and assist the one right beside you is as wrong as ignoring the poverty all around just to concentrate on one's personal concerns. Both public acts of almsgiving and private acts of sympathy and compassion are part of being His disciple. Neither one is a substitute for the other.

Jesus is no ideologue who believes that some social program can solve all of society's ills, nor is He some Puritan who would deny Himself the sensuous pleasure of the ointment. He recognizes the need to give and to receive in a variety of circumstances from the most unlikely of benefactors. The author, Mary Gordon, in her novel, Final Payments, has one of her characters comment, "What Christ was saying was that the pleasures of that ointment must be taken. Because the accidents of death would deprive us soon enough, we must not deprive ourselves, our loved ones, of the luxury of our extravagant affections. We must not try to second-guess death by refusing to love the ones we love in favor of the anonymous poor."

I have been emphasizing how alone and isolated Jesus was during that last week of His life. But, truth be told, He was not completely alone. He could trust in the One Whom He called Father, Who would be His support during those final days. He was grounded in God. Sometime during the next week it might do us well for each of us to be alone with ourselves, and to reflect on the events of Jesus' Passion and Death in light of the events in our own lives, and to find in those quiet moments how we can never be truly alone, if we, like Jesus, are grounded in the One Whom he called "Father," and is our Father as well.