

## The Beautiful Gift

It's strange how people's ideas about you can be so wrong. I know that's true about me. People call me "the saintly Mary of Bethany"! As if the other Marys weren't saintly! Mary from Magdala, Mary the wife of Clopas, and of course the greatest Mary of all! If they only knew—I'm the least saintly of any of them.

And it makes me mad when I hear of people distinguishing me from another woman who did the same thing as I once did. They are right to say that we are not the same person (some have made that mistake), but they are wrong in the reason they give. They say, "That woman was a sinner, she was disreputable, she was really a prostitute. Totally different from the saintly Mary of Bethany"! If they only knew!

I did come from Bethany—that at least is true! It's a little village just two miles out of Jerusalem, on the other side of the Mount of Olives on the road down to Jericho. But I had been away from home for some time. I'll not say much about that time. The least said the better. Suffice to say it had been the result of a foolish infatuation. When you are young, you tend to be blinded by charm and wealth and good looks—and he certainly had all of these. It was a great adventure. My family of course were all against it, but I wouldn't

listen. Sometimes you just have to learn the hard way, it seems. At first it was beautiful. He showered me with presents. But after a while he got bored with me, and there were always other girls more pleasing. Eventually things became so unpleasant I had to leave.

I left just as I was, with not much more than the clothes I stood up in—except for one thing, that is. It was a bottle of perfume. It had been one of his presents. The bottle was made from a pure white stone. It was beautiful—pure white. And the perfume was costly—I didn't know then just how costly. But I always kept it. I just liked to look at it and hold it sometimes when I was depressed. It reminded me of the good times, of something beautiful, something that might have been. I don't know if it really helped, because it also reminded me of my foolishness, my waywardness and my shame. But I kept it.

It was hard going home, but I had nowhere else to go. Why was it hard? Well, my brother Lazarus would be all right, but it was my sister Martha—we'd never really got on. She was the practical, sensible one. I was the dreamy, emotional one. She married Simon and settled down to a life of domestic bliss. And I did something stupid.

Anyway back to Bethany I had to go. And it turned out totally different from what I expected. They

were all glad to see me, and they were all agog with the news of what had happened to Simon. Seemingly he had contracted leprosy. That was bad enough in itself, but it also meant he had to go into quarantine, excluded from the community, not allowed even to worship with other people. That's when this man from Galilee came. Everyone was talking about him. He was a preacher, but also something of a healer, seemingly. It was Jesus. Simon said he touched him—something no one else would have dared to do—and he was instantly cured of his leprosy! Well, I was a bit sceptical, but Simon certainly was cured and everyone insisted he had had leprosy.

Anyway, not long after that I had the chance to see him for myself, because Simon and Martha had invited him and a whole crowd of his followers to stay. The house was packed and Martha as usual was bustling around, organising everything and bossing everyone around. But I couldn't take my eyes off him, I didn't want to miss a word. I just sat there and drank in everything he said. I'd never heard anything like it. It was beautiful. He was beautiful... not in looks—I don't mean he was bad looking, but it was more in how he was, in how he spoke, in how he treated people. But mostly it was his stories. I don't know how to explain it, but they were beautiful. He told one about a man who

found treasure in a field and he went and sold everything he had and he bought that field. He said that's what the kingdom of heaven is like. Or he told one about a woman who had 10 silver coins and she lost one. So she went and swept the house and searched until she found it. She called her friends and neighbours in to celebrate. He said in the same way there's joy in heaven over one bad person that changes. He looked at me and smiled as he said that. I began to feel my heart that had been so hard begin to melt

It was just about then that Martha came bustling in and interrupted. She was all hot and bothered. She said to him, "Don't you care that Mary has left me to do all the work by myself? She's just sitting there doing nothing. Tell her to help me!"

I jumped up and said I was sorry and I would come and help, and I started crying, but Jesus said, "Martha, Martha, you are all bothered about so many things, but there's only one thing that is absolutely necessary and Mary has chosen that. And it's much better, because she will never lose that. Come and sit down." Then Martha started crying and gave me a hug and we sat down together and listened to what Jesus was saying, and that's when he told the most marvellous story of all, about two brothers.

There was this man who had two sons. And the younger son asked his father to give him his share of the inheritance right away. So the father divided up all his property between the two of them. But the younger son went off abroad with his share and wasted the lot. When he lost everything, there was a famine. But all his fair-weather friends were gone. Nobody wants to know you when you're down and out! He got a job feeding pigs and he was so hungry he wanted to eat the pigswill.

It was there in that foreign country in filth and squalor that he came to his senses. He remembered his home. Even his father's casual labourers were well provided for, and here he was starving to death. He realised he'd gone far wrong. He decided he would go back home and confess what he'd done. He realised he could no longer be considered a son; just a casual labourer.

It was a long way back. But eventually he was near home. He was skin and bone and he smelt something terrible. But while he was still a good distance away, he saw his father running to meet him. His father threw his arms around him and kissed him and said, "Welcome home, son!"

But the son said, "Father, I've sinned both against you and against God. I don't deserve to be called your son."

But his father said, "You're my son. You're back from the dead. You're going to get cleaned up and dressed, and we're going to have a welcome home party!"

Well, the party was in full swing, with music and dancing, when the older brother came home from work. He was not well-pleased! In fact, when he heard his brother was welcomed home, he refused to go into the house, even when his father come out and pleaded with him to go in. He would have none of it. He said that he'd been slaving away for his father all these years, and lived a good life and did what he was told. But his father had never even given him a special meal! "And when this fellow who wasted your money on prostitutes comes home, you throw a party for him!"

His father said, "I already gave you everything, my son. It's all yours! You don't have to ask permission to have a party! But your brother was dead and he's alive again. He was lost and now he's found!"

When Jesus had finished, Martha said she had been just like that older brother, and could I forgive her? And I said I had been just like that younger brother, and could she and Lazarus forgive me? And

from that day to this we've been the closest brother and sisters—just like a family is supposed to be. And it was all Jesus' doing.

But then there came a dark time. A time when we never thought we would be happy again. Lazarus, our brother became seriously ill. Jesus had left some time before this, because the high up ones in Jerusalem were plotting to arrest him. He was away on the other side of the Jordan River, away beyond Jericho. So we sent word that Lazarus was ill. We knew Jesus would come and help us.

But he didn't get here in time. By the time the messenger we'd sent got back, a week after he'd left, Lazarus had already died. But the messenger told us that Jesus had said, "This sickness will not end in death. It's for God's glory so the Son of God will be glorified." We didn't know what on earth he meant. It had ended in death and where was the glory in that? And where was he?

It was two days after that word came. The house was still crowded with friends and relations who had come down from Jerusalem to mourn with us. But we got a private message that Jesus was coming. Martha of course had to go out to meet him. I didn't want to. I didn't want him to see my disappointment. And

anyway, what was the point now? So I stayed in the house.

But after a while Martha came back and took me aside. She said, “The Teacher is here (everyone called him that).” She was very excited and tried to tell me what he had said to her—something about him being the rising again and the life. Whoever believed in him would live even if he died. I couldn’t take it in, I was so sad and depressed. But she did say that Jesus wanted to see me. When I heard that, it was as if a spell had been broken and I fairly ran out of the house. Martha had difficulty keeping up with me to tell me where to go. But I hardly needed to be told. He was on the outskirts of the village on the road near the tombs.

When I saw him it was as if a dam had burst. I fell at his feet weeping. I said, “Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Seemingly Martha had said exactly the same thing. Strange that! By this time all the people who had been following us were there, and they were all crying. Jesus looked at them and he looked at me, and I’ve never seen anyone look like that. The expression on his face... it’s difficult to describe. At first I thought he was angry. He breathed out violently—it wasn’t exactly a sigh—it was more like a horse that was wild—you know, rearing up against its enemies. It was as if he hated death and what it did to

people. But then I thought it was a look of pure love and sympathy. He was deeply moved.

He asked where Lazarus was buried. He just managed to get the words out. Various people pointed over to the tombs and said, "Come and see." As he looked over to the tombs, the most wonderful thing happened. He burst into tears. You know how men try to hide the fact they are crying? They think it's not manly or something. Well he wasn't like that. He didn't hide it. He sobbed and the tears poured down his face.

Someone in the crowd said, "Look! See how much he loved Lazarus!" But others said things like, "Couldn't he have kept him from dying? He's healed the blind, after all." But Jesus paid no attention. When he came to the tomb, he breathed out like he had done before. If anything it sounded even more indignant. He stood facing the great stone rolled in front of the entrance to the tomb. And then he said, "Remove the stone!" There was a shocked silence. It was Martha who broke it. "But Lord there will be a terrible smell. He's been in there four days!" Martha, practical as ever!

Jesus said, "Didn't I tell you if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" And they removed the stone.

Jesus looked up to the sky and prayed, "Father, I thank you you've heard me. I pray this so that all the

people standing here may believe that you have sent me.”

Then Jesus shouted. It was so loud, I nearly jumped out of my skin. He called, “Lazarus, come out!” For a moment, nothing. And then in the dark entrance of the tomb stood a figure in white grave-clothes. A shiver ran all over my body and I nearly screamed. But then they were taking the grave-clothes off him and it was Lazarus—alive and well—better than I had ever seen him.

It was the most amazing thing that had ever been done. I knew then that all the titles people gave him were inadequate—Teacher, prophet, even Christ. He was the Lord, God’s own Son. Martha and I were agreed about that.

But it was strange—some people who had been there, who actually saw it happen, went straight back to Jerusalem and told the high up ones, the lawyers and priests, and they called a meeting. They said that things couldn’t go on like this. Soon everyone would believe in him as king and the Romans would come and destroy the temple and the city and our nation. Seemingly Caiaphas, the High Priest, said “Don’t you realise that it’s better for you that one man dies for the people than that the whole nation perishes.”

“One man die for the people”—he spoke more than he knew. But anyway, orders went out to arrest Jesus, and he had to withdraw to a remote village on the edge of the desert.

It was just six days before the Feast of the Passover that he came back. The Passover commemorated the time God set the people of Israel free from slavery in Egypt, when God told them to sprinkle the blood of a lamb on their door-posts and they would be safe when the Angel of Death passed over to kill all the firstborn.

It was then Jesus came back to stay with us with his followers. And Martha and Simon put on a dinner in his honour, and Lazarus was there too. Martha was busy serving the meal, but I was restless. I was uptight. I couldn't settle. Everyone was carrying on as normal, as if nothing was going to happen. And I knew something *was* going to happen—something bad. I went back to my room, and I fidgeted. I fiddled with things. I knew they were going to kill him, and I knew that he himself had said as much. The others didn't believe it—they thought he was speaking spiritually—some sort of parable—but I knew he wasn't. I thought of my brother Lazarus in that cold, cold tomb, and how that's where he would be. I wondered if anyone would be allowed to bury him properly, to anoint his body

with spices and perfumes. I felt something cold in my hands. I looked at it. It was my precious bottle of perfume, made of cold white stone, containing pure oil of nard—an exquisite perfume brought all the way from the mountains of the East. It was heavy. It held about a pint. I had kept it all that time. I thought of the beautiful life I might have had—away from illness, violence and death—my life filled with beautiful things. And I knew it was a mirage. In that moment I knew what I must do. I remembered that other woman, the woman they called “a sinner”, only they meant something worse. I remembered how she had shown her love to Jesus for forgiving her and setting her free.

I grasped my precious gift in both hands and went downstairs. I went straight to where Jesus was reclining and I smacked the neck of the bottle on the edge of the table, knocking it right off. People jumped. But not Jesus. He looked at me and smiled as I poured the perfume on his head. It was a beautiful amber-coloured oil.

I wanted to anoint his head because he was God’s chosen King and yet our nation had not accepted him. No one had ever anointed his head, as Samuel had done to the shepherd boy David so long ago. Someone had to do it. I realised it was up to me. I had to do what I could.

Then I poured the perfumed oil on his feet. There was too much, so I did what that woman had done. I let down my long hair and I wiped his feet with it. The whole house was filled with the most exquisite fragrance—the most beautiful scent I have ever smelled.

But I realised right away that not everyone thought it was beautiful—not the smell, no one could think that wasn't beautiful—but what I had done. Judas, one of Jesus' friends, had picked up the remains of the shattered bottle and was studying it. He was so agitated he could hardly speak. "This bottle was worth thousands! It should have been sold and the proceeds given to the poor!" Several others joined in with him, and I suddenly felt I had done something dreadful. The beauty of the moment was gone, spoiled. I didn't know then that Judas only said this because the money would go to him as the group's treasurer, and he used to help himself to it. What a hypocrite! But that wouldn't really have helped. It was just more ugliness, the beauty was destroyed.

But Jesus restored the beauty. At first he was angry. He spoke sharply to them, "Leave her alone! Why are you attacking her?" Then he added, "She's done a beautiful thing to me! There will always be poor people and you can help them at any time. But you will not always have me. Mary did what she could. She

anointed my body to prepare for my burial. Wherever the good news is preached throughout the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her!"

The beauty was restored. Jesus knew how to receive love, because he knew how to love. He accepted what I'd done for what it was—the extravagant, beautiful gift of a foolish, but loving heart.

It was sad, but it was that very night that Judas went to the high up ones to betray Jesus. Seemingly his idea of a kingdom had no room for the extravagant beauty of love, only the hard beauty of silver and gold.

It was just a few days later, on the eve of Passover that they finally caught up with Jesus, and on Passover itself that they cruelly put him to death. It was an ugly place, that hill outside Jerusalem, an ugly place for ugly work. But it was there the beautiful gift was given. The blood of the Lamb was sprinkled. The one man died for the people.

And on the third day another stone was rolled away, another grave was empty, this time never to be filled again, and another Mary fell at the Saviour's feet. But that is another story.

Luke 10:38-42  
John 11:1-12:11  
Mark 14:1-11