

Yesterday our Family Service was brought together under the theme ‘From Cheers to Jeers’. In reading and song and drama we reflected on the change in mood that week before Passover. It began with Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, enthusiastically greeted by the crowds and ended with him being paraded through the streets of Jerusalem, bearing his own cross, to his death on Calvary.

This week in our Holy Week reflections we are going to be following that same journey through the eyes of St John.

We begin six days before the Passover in the house of Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Jesus comes as a friend of long standing. John has told us of the details of the raising of Lazarus, his delay in coming, the reactions of his sisters Martha and Mary. Luke, in his Gospel has previously picked up on a pair of sisters named Martha and Mary. Martha so practical, ensuring meals were ready on time, the house was prepared for guests. Mary just relished being in the presence of Jesus – details of housekeeping of no concern. I have always thought that there needs to be something of Martha and Mary in all of us.

Here in the home of Lazarus, we come across Martha and Mary once more. Martha is doing what Martha does best. She is there looking after everyone, seeing that everyone is comfortable, that they have enough to eat. And Mary .... What is Mary doing this time? Previously we heard of her simply sitting at Jesus’ feet, lost in her own thoughts as she listens to the Master.

This time she appears with an elaborate, ridiculously extravagant gift, a gift of fine perfume. Then without thought of what anyone might think she pours it all over his feet, and proceeds to wipe his feet with her hair – an almost scandalous action.

As the perfume fills the room, those around look on – Judas, perhaps voicing the thoughts of others, pours scorn on the waste – this could have been sold and money given to the poor. And if we are honest, part of us would share the thoughts of Judas. People don't behave like that in public, it is not seemly, it is not right.

And Jesus breaks through their muttered surprise and disapproval – she has done a beautiful thing – the perfume that filled the house spoke of gratitude for the restoration of their brother Lazarus, gratitude for the peace she had found in and through her fellowship with Jesus – and Jesus accepts that as he begins to speak of coming death – let her keep it for the day of my burial.

Mary has given extravagant expressions of gratitude and love – and Jesus has given to her in the very act of receiving. Early on in my ministry, I recall discussing with Archbishop McAdoo a lovely service rendered to me by a family in Raheny. He said, 'Yes, we are so used to be the ones who are giving – and we say that it is more blessed to give than to receive. But sometimes the most valuable gift we can give someone is to give them a chance to give to us.'

Jesus accepted the gift that Mary poured upon his feet that day, accepting not so much the gift as the love and gratitude that lay behind it.

He accepts our offering of worship, of service, in all its imperfection, in all its inadequacy. We offer him our best – it is not that it is not good enough. God looks beyond the imperfection of even our best and looks for sincerity, for gratitude, for love.

Almost as an after thought, John turns from the group gathered around the table in Lazarus's house to another group. In the house of Lazarus Jesus was a welcome guest, one who brought life and hope into their midst. On the margins, in the background there are the High Priests – to them Jesus is a dangerous radical, who is gathering support, who is leading the people astray – and he must be stopped.

The road to Calvary has begun.