

Encounter with Jesus – Mary of Bethany

In these services we are looking at people who have had an encounter with Jesus and the effect the encounter had on them. We have looked at several people who met Jesus physically during his ministry, through Peter and John after his death and in the Old Testament. Tonight we are going to look at Mary of Bethany, who had at least 3 encounters with Jesus. Hilary is going to read us her story.

Luke 10:38-42; John 11:1-45; John 12:1-8

Who was Mary of Bethany?

In medieval times (about 591 AD) Pope Gregory I gave a homily in which he linked Mary Magdalene, the unnamed woman who anointed Jesus feet and Mary of Bethany in what has become known as the "composite Magdalene". This was rejected in the 1969 revision of the General Roman Calendar, and tonight I am only going to consider the three passages we have had read which directly identify Mary of Bethany- first the incident in the home of her sister, Martha (and presumably Mary's from later passages) where Jesus, and probably the disciples who travelled with Him, were being entertained; secondly as the sister of Martha and brother of Lazarus who Jesus raises from the dead and thirdly as a grateful woman who honours Jesus with an extravagant offering and worships him. From these we can learn some things about Mary. Neither Luke nor John makes any reference to a husband or father of Martha or Mary. Other references to people inviting Jesus into their home always refer to the head of the household (the home of a man known as Simon the Leper, the home of the synagogue ruler, the home of Simon), but here it says "a woman named Martha opened her home to him". The implication is that Martha and Mary were living on their own, so would have been well off – like other women who are mentioned as travelling with Jesus and providing funds to support him and the disciples. If a woman married her possessions became her husbands, so to live on your own as a woman you would have had to inherit quite a lot of money. The passage about the raising of Lazarus says "many Jews had come to Martha and Mary", it is possible these may have been professional mourners (in which case Mary and Martha had the means to pay them), but as we are told they had come from Jerusalem two miles away, the news of Lazarus' death must have been spread and so they were probably people who knew him and his sisters. This again implies a family of status or influence.

How did she encounter Jesus?

The first passage tells us Jesus stayed at her home while travelling through Bethany early in his ministry, being invited to do so by Martha. It was located about 1.5 miles (2.4 km) to the east of Jerusalem on the south-eastern slope of the Mount of Olives, the last village on the route to Jerusalem from Jericho and the Jordan. Jesus therefore passed through it several times on his journeys and probably stayed there in the last week of his life, travelling into Jerusalem each day (Mt 21:17). Jn 11: 5 records that "Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus", so he obviously got to know them well. When Lazarus became ill the sisters send word to Jesus, presumably asking him to come and heal him, so they effectively initiate the second encounter we are looking at tonight. The third passage is interesting in that it reveals Jesus arriving in Bethany at the start of Holy Week, and it is described as "where Lazarus lived". It does not say Jesus went to the home of Lazarus, just that a dinner was given in Jesus' honour and Lazarus was there, implying it was not Lazarus' house. Matthew and Mark's accounts of the encounter says it was in "the home of a man known as Simon the Leper", but Martha is again serving, so the relationship between Martha, Mary, Lazarus and Jesus must have been very close.

What happened during the encounter?

In the first passage Martha was so distressed and "distracted by all the preparations that had to be made" and frustrated that her sister wasn't helping that she actually rebuked Jesus, accusing Him of not caring that Mary sat at His feet while she did all the work. Jesus' response gives us

our first clue about Mary. Jesus commended her for “choosing the better,” meaning that Mary’s desire to be near her Lord and hang onto His every word was far more beneficial than running herself ragged with preparations for a meal. Jesus went further saying that choosing the better thing, learning of God, would not be taken away from her. He meant that those whose priority in life is Christ, the knowledge of Him, and nearness to Him have chosen what will last through eternity. From this encounter, we can learn that those who are distracted with mundane and earthly things are building upon a shaky foundation which will not stand the times of testing that come to us, nor will they be remembered in eternity. Martha’s rebuke of Jesus gives us insight into her heart and mind as she tried to make everything perfect and was so distracted that she lost sight of whom she was speaking to. Mary’s silence, which we see again in the 3rd encounter, indicates a lack of concern for herself, especially for defending herself. When we focus on Christ, He becomes our greatest passion and our tendency to self-absorption dims and fades.

In the second encounter, when Mary hears that Jesus has come and is calling for her, she immediately leaves the assembly of mourners in her home and rushes to meet Jesus. So great is her love for Him and her desire to please and obey Him that she leaves those who had come to comfort her to fall at his feet, a sign of worship. Jesus sees her great sorrow and weeps along with her, even though He knows her sadness is going to be short-lived and that her brother will be restored to her shortly. In the same way, when we sorrow and grieve, our greatest comfort is found in Jesus, whose compassion is boundless. When we place our hand in his nail-scarred hand, we find comfort, peace and security, and we can learn the truth of Psalm 30:5b: “Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning.” Mary had the joy of seeing her brother raised from the dead, we may not have the same physical blessings but we can get the joy of knowing we have eternal life.

The third encounter is just days before Christ’s crucifixion ([Matthew 26:1-6](#); [Mark 14:3-9](#); [John 12:1-8](#)). A meal had been prepared at the home of Simon the leper, probably a leper who had been healed by Jesus and had become one of His followers. Martha was again serving while the resurrected Lazarus reclined at the table with Jesus and the disciples. At some point, Mary broke open an alabaster jar, poured a pint of very expensive perfume on Jesus’ head and feet, and wiped them with her hair. In spite of criticism from some of the disciples about the waste of the costly substance, Mary said nothing. Just as in the first encounter, Mary allowed Jesus to defend her, which He does, saying that she has kept this perfume for His burial and has done a beautiful act of service to Him for which she would be remembered down through the ages.

What effect did the encounter have on Mary?

Mary was obviously a strong woman who disregarded many social niceties of the time. She sat at Jesus feet to learn from him as a disciple – a role normally reserved for men, although “many women ... had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs” (Mt 27:55). She does not react angrily to criticisms from either her sister or others, but focuses on Jesus and her relationship with him. In the 3rd encounter, she seems to know that the time of Jesus’ death on the cross was at hand, a fact that the disciples had missed in spite of Jesus’ clear declaration of this truth. Mary contented herself with listening to her Lord and meditating on His words, while the disciples bickered about who would be greatest among them in the kingdom. By doing so, they missed the important truths Jesus was teaching them about His upcoming death and resurrection ([Mark 9:30-35](#)). How often do we miss spiritual truths because we are self-focused and overly concerned for our rewards, our status and our reputation among men? Mary gave to the limit of her love and ointment. What will Jesus say of us when we see Him face to face - you have done all you could? Do we constantly anoint Him as the Lord of our life and give him our richest gifts of time, love and money? The world may count a life wholly consecrated and dedicated to Jesus as a life wasted, but only a life totally given to Him is one following his own example.

Discussion – There are two questions for us here which I would like you to discuss in your groups and we'll then have a short feedback from each group:

How well do we listen to Jesus? Are we distracted by the mundane things of life so we don't focus on him?

What is meant by "giving up everything" to follow Jesus?