

[R2447 : page 76]

"A BOTTLE OF SPIKENARD, VERY COSTLY."

– APRIL 9. – JOHN 12:1-11. –

"She hath done what she could." – Mark 14:8.

THE last week of our Lord's earthly ministry was a busy one. The sixth day previous to the Passover was the Jewish Sabbath, which ended at six o'clock in the evening, and it is possible that it was at that time that our Lord and his disciples were entertained by Martha and Mary at "the house of Simon the leper" – probably their father: Lazarus, their brother, whose recovery from death was noted in the previous lesson, was also one of the table-guests.

Our Lord knew that the time of his death was near at hand, and he had given intimations of this to his beloved disciples, but they were so accustomed to having him say wonderful things beyond the power of their comprehension that they probably failed to realize their closeness to the great tragedy of Calvary. This need not surprise us when we remember the Scriptural declaration that our Lord spake in parables and dark sayings – "and without a parable spake he not unto the people:" for instance, his declaration, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." And again, "I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any man shall eat of this bread he shall live forever." And again, "Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you." (John 2:19; 6:51,53.) Having in mind such unusual language, the apostles would be entirely excusable in doubting the proper meaning to be attached to our Lord's declaration, "The Son of man must be lifted up," and other similar expressions foretelling his death.

Before coming to the consideration of the Bethany supper and the anointing on that Sabbath evening, let us have before our minds the incidents of the days following it, that we may be able to appreciate our Lord's declaration that the anointing with the spikenard was

preparatory to his burial. The next morning (the first day of the week, now usually called Sunday), having sent after the ass, our Lord rode upon it to Jerusalem. The people, recognizing the wonderful miracle wrought upon Lazarus, congregated and hailed him as Messiah, the Son of David, fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah (9:9), and strewed clothing and palm branches in the way; (hence this is generally known as Palm Sunday). It was on this occasion that our Lord wept over Jerusalem, and declared, "Your house is left unto you desolate." – Matt. 23:38.

It is supposed that it was on the second day (Monday) that our Lord scourged the money-changers out of the Temple, and taught the people there; and we gather from the narrative that it was in his journey on this day that he pronounced the curse upon "the barren fig tree," supposed to represent the Jewish nation – barren of fruit, and therefore rejected. It would appear that the third day (Tuesday) was again spent teaching in the Temple, answering questions, etc., and that evening, as they returned again to Bethany, he discoursed with his disciples respecting the great events near at hand. The fourth day (Wednesday) apparently was spent quietly at Bethany, and on the fifth day (Thursday) the disciples made ready the Passover supper which was eaten after six o'clock that evening – the beginning of the sixth day (Friday) according to Jewish reckoning – the 14th of Nisan. The Gethsemane experiences followed that night and the trial before Pilate the next morning, and the crucifixion later. **[R2448 : page 76]**

Now we come back to witness the hospitalities extended to our Lord six days before the crucifixion, at the house of Simon the leper, the home of Martha and Mary and Lazarus. We are to remember that our Lord was a visitor in those parts, his home, to the extent that he ever had one, being in Galilee, and the most of his time spent there. "He would not walk in Jewry, because the Jews sought to kill him." (John 7:1.) But now the time for his sacrifice had come, and in harmony therewith he came amongst his enemies, – altho it was

known that prominent Jews sought to kill him and also sought the death of Lazarus, who was a living witness to his Messianic power.

We may suppose that this was no ordinary supper, but in the nature of a feast or banquet in our Lord's honor. Nevertheless, one incident connected with it so outshone all its other features that the narrator mentions it alone – the anointing of our Lord with the [R2448 : page 77] "spikenard ointment, very costly." Our Lord himself declared, "Wheresoever this gospel shall be preached throughout the whole world, this also which this woman hath done shall be spoken of for a memorial of her." (Mark 14:9.) It is entirely proper, therefore, that we should examine with some particularity the details of this service so highly esteemed by the Master.

Prof. Shaff says, "By the 'ointment' we are to understand rather a liquid perfume than what we commonly know as ointment." The alabaster box was rather in the shape of a flask or vase, and the breaking of the box (Mark 14:3) signifies the opening of its tyings and seals by which the precious odors were confined. Judas' words of dissatisfaction furnish us a clue respecting the costliness of this perfume, for he says that it "might have been sold for three hundred *denarii*." A *denarius*, translated "penny" in vs. 5, is represented as being the average daily wages at that time – "a penny [*denarius*] a day." (Matt. 20:2.) If we compare these values with present money values, counting farm labor at fifty cents a day (which is certainly a moderate valuation), the three hundred *denarii* would be the equivalent in wages of one hundred and fifty dollars of our money. Thus we see that the perfume was indeed "very costly." There was nearly a pint of the perfume, a Roman pound being twelve ounces. Nor need we question the possibility of perfumes being so expensive, for even to-day we have a counterpart in value in the attar of roses made in the far East. It is claimed that four hundred thousand full-grown roses are used to produce one ounce of this perfume, which, in its purity, sells as high as one hundred dollars an ounce, or twelve hundred dollars for the quantity used by Mary in anointing our Lord.

It is said that Nero was the first of the Emperors to indulge in the use of costly perfumes for his anointing; but one much more worthy of tribute, homage and anointing with a sweet perfume was the "Prince of the kings of the earth," whom Mary had the honor to anoint.

Calculated at \$50 per day (a little above minimum wage for 2005) this would yield \$15,000 - very costly indeed! - Site Editor.

Judas was first to object to this as a waste – the difficulty with him being that he loved the Lord too little and money too much. The amount that love is willing to expend for others is, to some extent at least, a measure of the love. Another Evangelist informs us that several of the disciples, under the influence of Judas' words, took the same view of the matter, and spoke disapprovingly of Mary's action. The Apostle John, however, takes this opportunity to throw a little sidelight upon the character of Judas – more than is apparent in the common translation of vs. 6. His declaration is, "Now he said this, not because he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief, and had the box, and stole what things were deposited in it." – *Diaglott*.

Our Lord's words, "Let her alone!" are in the nature of a severe reproof to those whose sentiments of love had no other measure than that of money. It was indeed true that there were plenty of poor, and there would still be plenty of poor, and plenty of opportunities to minister to them; but the opportunity to specially honor the Lord, and to pour upon him the fragrant odors so beautifully expressive of Mary's love and devotion, would not be for long, and our Lord declares that the circumstances fully justified the costly expenditure. He shows himself out of sympathy with the sentiments which balance themselves too accurately with money values. Moreover, we may esteem that in many instances like the one here recorded the persons who are so careful lest money should be spent except for the poor are often like Judas, so avaricious that whatever money gets into their possession very little of it gets to the poor.

On the contrary, it is the deep, loving, benevolent hearts, like that of Mary, which delight in costly sacrifices at times, which also are likely to be deeply sympathetic and helpful to the physically poor. And in our ministrations to others we are not to forget that money is not the only thing of which people are sorely in need – some need love and sympathy, who do not need money. Our Lord was one of these: his own heart, full of love, found comparatively little companionship in the more or less sordid minds of even the noblest of the fallen race represented amongst his apostles. In Mary he seemed to find the depth of love and devotion which was to him an odor of sweet incense, of refreshment, of reinvigoration, a tonic: and Mary apparently appreciated, more than did others, the lengths and breadths and heights and depths of the Master's character; she not only delighted to sit at his feet to learn of him, but now delighted, at a great cost, to give him some manifestation of her devotion, her love.

She poured the perfume first upon our Lord's head (Mark 14:3), the usual custom, and then the remainder she poured upon his feet. But the Apostle John, in recording the matter, seems to have forgotten entirely the anointing of our Lord's head, so deeply was he impressed with the still more expressive devotion manifested in the anointing of the feet and the wiping of them with the hairs of her head. It is indeed a picture of love – a devotion well worthy of being told as a memorial. Some one has said, –

"She took 'woman's chief ornament' and devoted it to wiping the travel-stained feet of her Teacher; she devoted the best she had to even the least honorable service for him. It was the strongest possible expression of her love and devotion. She gave her choicest treasures in the most self-devoted manner. She was bashful and retiring, and could not speak her feelings, and therefore she expressed them in this manner."

We are not surprised to learn that the whole house [R2448 : page 78] was filled with the odor; and we doubt not that the odor remained

for a long time: but far more precious than that was the sweet odor of Mary's heart-affections which the Lord accepted and will never forget, and the sweet odor of her devotion which has come down through the centuries to us, bringing blessing to all true hearts who have honored her service and desired to emulate her conduct.

It is not our privilege to come into personal contact with our dear Redeemer, but we have, nevertheless, many opportunities for doing that which to some extent will correspond to Mary's act – it is our privilege to anoint the Lord's "brethren" with the sweet perfume of love, sympathy, joy and peace, and the more costly this may be as respects our self-denials, the more precious it will be in the estimation of our Elder Brother, who declared that in proportion as we do or do not unto his brethren, we do or do not unto him. (Matt. 25:40,45.) Moreover, he represents these "brethren" in a figure as "members of his body;" and from this standpoint we see that, while it is not our privilege to pour the perfume upon the Head of the body, now highly exalted far above angels, principalities and powers, and every name that is named – next to the Father, – it is our privilege to pour the perfume upon the feet of Christ – the last living members of his Church of this Gospel age.

We know not to what extent the closing years of this Gospel age may correspond to the closing days of our Lord's ministry – we know not how similar may be the experiences of the "feet" of the body of Christ to the experiences of the Head of the body; we do know, however, that in any event it is our blessed privilege to comfort one another, to encourage one another, to sustain one another, in the trials incident to our "filling up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ." (Col. 1:24.) And to whatever extent we would improve these opportunities, as did Mary, we must first appreciate them as she did.

Nothing in this suggestion is intended to imply any neglect of the members of our natural families "according to the flesh:" attentions to these are proper always, and are generally so understood, and should

more and more be appreciated and used in proportion as the Lord's people receive freely and fully of his spirit of love, – kindness, gentleness, patience, long-suffering. But we emphasize that which the Scriptures emphasize, namely, that our interest and efforts are not to be confined to those of fleshly tie, but, on the contrary, are to be "especially to the household of faith." (Gal. 6:10.) There will be other and future opportunities of doing good to mankind in general, but the opportunity for serving "the body of Christ" is limited to the present age.

Apropos of this propriety of doing good to others – expressing our love by our conduct as well as by our words, to the members of our families as well as to the members of the body of Christ, we quote the words of another, –

"The sweetest perfume that the home circle ever knows arises from deeds of loving service which its members do for each other. The sweetest perfumes of our homes do not arise from elegant furniture, soft carpets, elegant pictures, or luxurious viands. Many a home, having all these, is pervaded by an atmosphere [R2449 : page 78] as tasteless and odorless as bouquets of waxen flowers."

Another has said, –

"If my friends have alabaster boxes full of fragrant perfume of sympathy and affection laid away, which they intend to break over my body, I would rather they would bring them out in my weary and troubled hours, and open them, that I might be refreshed and cheered with them while I need them....I would rather have a plain coffin without a flower, a funeral without a eulogy, than a life without the sweetness of love and sympathy.... Flowers on the coffin cast no fragrance backward on the weary road."
