

Maundy Thursday: CCSY, 9 April 2009

Through the eyes of Mary of Bethany

My name is Mary – Mary of Bethany. Let me tell you about those few hours which turned my world – what seemed like the whole world – upside down...

It began a few days before Passover. I could just picture Jerusalem as we set out from Bethphage a few miles away: chock-a-block with tired but excitable pilgrims, jostling and haggling in the narrow, dusty streets; the smell of sacrifice in air. When we came within sight of the city my stomach began to churn.

At the outskirts of my home village people had begun to recognise him. We'd spent so much time together here: the house of my brother Lazarus and sister Martha was like a second home to him. He rode a donkey leading us down the valley and up, up to Jerusalem, the Temple mount brilliant in the spring sunshine.

Friends let their children tag along with our little procession. Some ran on ahead and shimmied up the date palms, stripping branches to wave and lay down on the road, creating – just for a moment – a green, leafy highway, fit for a king.

A few adults even called out: *Hashoana! Hashoana!* 'Hosanna': 'save us'! It's what you'd cry if you had fallen into a deserted well and someone appeared above you in the circle of light with a rope in hand. It's what you say when you know you have been saved – a shout of exultation in the presence of the One who saves. *Hashoana! Hashoana!*

What did they expect of him this delirious lot? What did I expect of him? A political movement? A coup? The Romans were as entrenched as ever – the latest in a long line of occupying or despoiling powers stretching back to Assyria – to Amalek on our way out of Egypt – why should things be any different now? And what if he should disappoint them?

Passover time, Pesach, that great festival of liberation – our story of origin as a people. A night on which countless tables were being prepared, and heads of households poring over the words of the *Seder* – this uniquely ordered meal. How does it begin? 'This is the bread of poverty which our forebears ate in the land of Egypt. Let all who are hungry enter and eat; let all who are needy come to our Passover feast.'

His table was always like that – roomy – with a space set for the hungry, the needy – which was all of us, basically; which is me.

The bread of poverty: unleavened bread because there was no time to tarry on that fateful night; bitter herbs because the lives of our forebears were bitter in Egypt. What is the one who presides at table to say? 'In every generation let us each regard ourselves as though we had come out of Egypt...'

Everyone yearned to keep this feast in Jerusalem, and here we were. Why, then, did it seem like we were walking right back through the Red Sea and headlong into bitterness?

The men – Peter, James, John, and the rest of the twelve – were in a flap about getting things ready in time and finding a room where we could eat together, somewhere private. They were edgy. He was quiet, sort of preoccupied.

I don't think the twelve really wanted us there, but he never seemed to mind who was with him. Still, we stayed in the background – did the 'serving' things, you know. Actually, that's not quite true. It was he who did the serving things – the serving thing.

Was this our Passover come early? We were a household of sorts, that's for sure, and eating with him was often an experience of liberation. Somehow he always transformed the bread of poverty into something else, as he did that night.

As I watched him move around the table washing their feet I remembered that day at our house in Bethany. I had this alabaster jar of pure nard, costly stuff – the only thing of any real value amongst my belongings. No one knew what to do when I threw myself down at his feet – no one, that is, except him. He just sat there as I poured it all out at his feet: a mess of tears, oil and hair. It was the most natural thing in the world to do, to take that jar, break it, and spend it all – waste it, some would say – did say, in fact – in that one precious moment of complete acceptance. Now he'd done a similar thing for us: kneeling at our feet, wetting them, wiping them, without a word.

The mood at the table was heavy, serious. There had been trouble brewing – we all knew it – but things might blow over...? Somehow, looking at his eyes, at the depth of his love and sadness, I sensed otherwise.

Things broke up quickly after that. Judas left in a hurry after an exchange of words. The rest of us cleaned up a bit and headed out into the night. The Passover moon was covered by a mass of thick, dark clouds, pressing down on the city like a millstone, or perhaps a tombstone...

We went across the Kidron Valley with him once more, to the olive garden. He seemed troubled, but when I suggested we leave him be, he said he wanted the company. If I'd known what was about to happen I'd never have left the safety of that room. As a bad dream it unfolded. I wonder if he knew what was coming? And if he did, why didn't he run, as – one way or another – we all did that night?

Somewhere in the middle of it all, in the shadows between the High Priest's house and the Roman precinct, Thursday slipped into Friday...

When it all gets too much I take myself back to that room, that table, where we shared the bread of poverty – and as I pour it all out at his feet again I am fed by him who poured himself out that night before our eyes.

It was, I would come to realise, his Passover: his impossibly difficult passage, and ours too – our story of origin as a people after all, rewritten with his blood, retold on the parchment of his broken body.

Let all who are hungry enter and eat;
Let all who are needy come to our feast.

Richard Treloar
Christ Church South Yarra