

# Monday of Holy Week

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## Introduction

This story is set six days before Passover, in a time of preparation for a feast. Can you think of the days of preparation for a feast in your home? Is Easter a day like that for your family and friends? Or is it more likely to be Christmas when your friends and family gather for feasting?

What is the role of gift-giving in the feasts in your home? Are there hardboiled eggs or chocolate eggs given on Easter Sunday? How do the gifts of Easter compare to those of Christmas? In this story, Mary brings a precious gift. She doesn't gift-wrap it, nor does she give Jesus any choice in the manner in which he receives that gift. She anoints his feet, and wipes them with her hair.

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## Text

John 12:1-11

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.

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## Comment

I will be looking at the life of a different hymn writer each day this Holy Week. This is to illustrate conflicts in the text, or between the text and the interpretations which have perhaps run for a very long time, unquestioned. In the precious giving of nard by Mary Magdalen, I want to think of the work and life of Christina

Rossetti. Perhaps we might most-easily connect Rossetti's writing on gifts and gift-giving with Christmas:

'If I were a wise man,  
I would do my part;  
Yet what I can I give him  
Give my heart'

Rossetti's poem isn't tied in any definite way to her gender, yet in this final verse she juxtaposes the shepherd and the wise man with her own position: 'poor as I am'. Mary also juxtaposes herself with the men around Jesus, incurring their criticism, perhaps even their anger. She brings a luxurious, expensive, glorious gift; we do not know if she was poor or not, but we must conclude the nard was hers, and that she chose to give it away. We then watch in our mind's eye as she kneels before Jesus and wipes the perfume away with her hair. This is an intimate, feminine gift-giving. It is performed in the male space of the dining room where Mary and Martha's role is to serve while the men eat, a custom Jesus has also questioned in a previous visit to the house.

Rossetti ended three relationships with men which might have led to marriage – as far as we are aware, her reasons were religious. It is possible she was gay, or that she wished to remain single to preserve her intellectual or religious freedoms: we will never know. For a single woman in the mid-nineteenth century, to refuse three eligible suitors was unusual. Her father had lost his earning through ill health and died in 1854. Her family's conformity with the traditional, patriarchal model of the family in Victorian Britain was broken, and Rossetti's repeated refusals to marry continued to break that social norm.

In this, Mary and Christina had something in common. Rossetti volunteered at a home for ex-prostitutes, named after St Mary Magdalene, who is often associated with the unnamed woman in Luke 7:36–50 who poured perfume on Jesus' feet in the house of a Pharisee. The possible relationship between that story and the one we read today has been much discussed by scholars, but it is clear that the motif of using their hair to wipe the feet of the messiah is repeated in both tales because loose hair was a symbol of feminine sexuality and potentially of prostitution. In John's tale, however, this Mary, the sister of Lazarus, is clearly under the guidance of a patriarchal male: her brother. I wonder what age she would have been? Was her hair loose because she was too young to marry? Had she to wait because her older sister, Martha, was to be married first? Or had she, like Christina, refused suitors to remain in her family home?

Judas is introduced into the story as the main critic, and as a 'thief', but with no previous evidence or stories to validate that claim. The contrast is drawn between the honest woman and the dishonest man, again turning ethical norms on their heads, as in patriarchal societies, men were more likely to be deemed honest or reliable; women less so. The witness of a man was of more value than the witness of a woman, the word of a man of more consequence.

Is Christina Rossetti also questioning the wise man in her comparison with herself? What part was he to play that she could not? Nard was one of the gifts given to Jesus at his birth, and is brought into John's narrative as a clear precedent to his death. Nard was used to dress bodies for burial: it would be like walking into a modern Christmas party with an undertaker, or dressed in a shroud.

For me, the interweaving of these two tales, and lives, gives a model of the Christian woman who is strong, and a prophet in her own right. Whether wealthy or poor, she gives gifts of her own choosing in her own way, and Jesus accepts them in their own terms. For both women, Mary and Christina, their gift-giving to God is also personally liberating, freeing them from the expectations of the patriarchal society in which they lived:

'Our God, heav'n cannot hold him,  
Nor earth sustain  
Heav'n and earth shall flee away  
When he comes to reign  
In the bleak mid-winter a stable place sufficed  
The Lord God Almighty,

## Response

Sing In the Bleak Mid-winter, or listen to a rendition of it, and think about the words with relation to Mary's gift of nard to Jesus in our text today. What insights do you gain from comparing the two festivals of Easter and Christmas? What is your view of patriarchal social norms? Are they something Jesus approved and sustained? Or is this story one which challenged those norms in Jesus' day?

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## Prayer

Eternal God,  
I bring you pure nard, Coco-Chanel, Christian Dior,  
a fragrance of beauty to float to heaven,  
a scented liberation pouring freedom on your feet.  
In this expression of love and devotion I see your reign in heaven,  
eternal, everlasting, beyond all things,  
as something in which I share as an equal, a person of power, someone who matters.  
In and through our lord Jesus Christ whose feet Mary anointed in oil,  
Amen

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