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MARY OF BETHANY

by F. S. PARNHAM

MR. PARNHAM'S Biblical meditations are always refreshing, and it is a pleasure to publish a new one.

AMONG the number of godly women who adorn the pages of the New Testament Scriptures and are graced with the same name, Mary of Bethany fills an honoured place. Mary's grave and contemplative nature, lacking the robust qualities of her sister, found satisfaction in the more congenial atmosphere of "the better part" in which she was free to cultivate her affection for the Lord and for His ways. It was not long before this woman's devotion was put to the test and that, openly, before the assembled guests in the house of Simon when our Lord (presumably His disciples also) was entertained to supper. John's record of that event is expressed in the words of his Gospel (12: 3): "Then took Mary a pound of ointment of spikenard, very costly, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped His feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the odour of the ointment."

Sacrifice is costly and true devotion precious beyond earthly values. Without question Mary's loving ministration to a Saviour who was about to die has been an inspiration to the people of God and well deserved the commemorative blessing which the Lord pronounced on that occasion: "Wheresoever this gospel shall be preached throughout the whole world, this also that she hath done, shall be spoken of for a memorial of her" (Mark 14: 9). That gracious verdict is still valid. The passage of time has in no wise dimmed the lustre of that woman's devotion or caused the memory of her sacrifice to sink into the oblivion of human forgetfulness; it has been woven into the very fabric of Scripture. Preserved there in perennial freshness—because associated with a life-giving, worldwide proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ—its virtue blossoms anew with each successive generation. Because it recognizes neither national nor geographical barriers, its fragrance has persisted and filled the house of Christian fellowship to this present day.

One noticeable feature of John's narrative is the absence of any reference to anointing the Saviour's head. With characteristic modesty "the disciple whom Jesus loved" directs our attention to the feet of Christ. Mary is consequently seen stooping low behind the Lord as He reclined at table, so that she might bestow the

marks of her understanding and affection wholly upon His feet. Pure, spiritual love—the mainspring of genuine devotion—“vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, seeketh not its own” (1 Cor. 13: 4, 5); it sanctifies the most menial of tasks and shines brightest when displayed against a background of conscious unworthiness. “If I may but touch his garment” (as in Matt. 9: 21), or anoint only His feet, is the language of those who feel themselves to be the spiritual kith and kin of chastened Jacob when he returns from his long exile and makes his confession to God: “I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies and of *all the truth*, which thou hast shown unto thy servant. . . .” (Gen. 32: 10). Self-effacement will enhance our Christian service. It will help us to concentrate our thoughts upon the Lord, to seek His glory first and last, so that we may share the noble sentiments of John Baptist when he said of Christ: “He must increase but I must decrease” (John 3: 30).

How grateful the Lord must have been for Mary’s silent, unsolicited ministry! How unerringly He divined her motive! As the cool, refreshing nard flowed from that alabaster flask and bathed those feet that, oftentimes weary and sore, had tramped the dusty highways and byways of Israel on many an errand of mercy, He rejoiced in spirit and paid audible tribute to the fact that “against the day of my burying hath she kept this.” To be sure, there was no lack of criticism; but love spares no expense to honour the Beloved. What are 300 pence (*denarii*)—say £20 or even £30—set against the Redeemer’s life or a common labourer’s wages for a whole year against so great a death? Yet, nothing daunted by the murmurs of the unsympathetic guests at the banquet. Mary descends even lower in the scale of humility, uncoils the tresses of her hair and, in defiance of established custom, wipes the Lord’s feet with what God gave to be her glory (1 Cor. 11: 15). “Let her alone” is the Saviour’s rejoinder to the carping critics, “she hath wrought a good work on me.”

Mary was evidently a woman of vision as well as of understanding. Out of all that festive company in the house of Simon she alone sensed the approaching threat to the life of her Lord and Teacher. While the rest were preoccupied with earthly things, seemingly unconcerned in the face of the growing hostility of the Jews and still largely ignorant of their Leader’s predestined fate, Mary, by contrast, could interpret the signs of the time with an insight that anticipated the ordeal of Golgotha and her Lord’s subsequent exodus. “In that she hath poured this ointment on my body, she did it for my burial” (Matt. 26: -12).

To what did Mary owe such rare perception of truth? Was it not

born and nourished in the house of her sister Martha on that memorable day when, choosing "the good part", the "one thing needful", she sat alone at the Lord's feet and "heard his word" (Luke 10: 39)? "She was listening to his discourse" (so the Greek) and if her apparent silence then is any guide, Mary was a good listener. As the words of grace and truth flowed from the lips of the Lord Jesus, Mary drank long and deeply of the life-giving stream and was content to listen in the place where humility and learning blend their respective virtues in fruitful partnership.

But the full assessment of this woman's character would be incomplete without the moving episode of John 11, where the Evangelist recounts the sickness and death of Lazarus and describes the differing reactions of two sisters in this domestic tragedy. While the Lord still lingers at a distance Martha, hearing of His approach, at once hastens to meet Him whereas Mary, true to her nature, remains seated in the house. What did she expect? Was it not that, knowing the mind of the Lord better, she could wait quietly until He called her (see verse 28)? Once the call came she lost no time in hurrying to the One, whom she had learned to obey, and then fell down at His feet a weeping worshipper with whose tears the Lord mingled His own.

It is not difficult to discover the secret of Mary's spiritual growth. It began and was fostered at the Lord's feet when she listened to His voice; it continued at the same hallowed place even in bereavement; it reached its consummation in the house of Simon, as she bent over those same feet, bathing them with costly unguent and bestowing upon them the consecration of an adoring and understanding heart. There is a sequence in the Lord's method of educating His people if we will but see it and respond. Under His able tuition small beginnings lead to great ends.

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