

Mary's Palm

The rain had eased. A cool night wind rustled the palm frond. Mary had arranged it carefully in the window so that it made an arch. In her mind she saw Jesus framed in it - a picture of his triumph. Triumph? How many of them really understood? She had joined the hustle of grasping hands after the procession. They were more interested in saving palms for their floors than in the king who had ridden across them. Elihu had a whole bundle of them which he carried to his streetside shop. He sold gifts to the pilgrims. 'When Jesus does become king,' Mary mused, 'old Elihu will likely be selling strips of those palm branches to festival visitors.'

Mary's determined effort to get herself a palm frond was for a very different reason. It was something of Jesus to keep for herself. She was sure of one thing. Jesus would not be with them much longer - she knew it in her heart, though her mind still refused to accept it. Except for the palm frond - and the fragments of the little alabaster jar, all she would have were her memories. She had kept the fragments of the ointment jar. It was the one she had given to the Master. They were now carefully arranged on the window ledge under the palm frond.

She was glad she had done it - anointing Jesus' feet. Martha of course had been embarrassed - and said so, but Lazarus had put that right, just as he had silenced old Joseph when he muttered, "Exhibitionist ! She wants marrying off does that girl. She's getting to the age." Mary was past caring what they thought. All right, perhaps she did have a crush on Jesus, as Martha suggested. "No, it isn't like that," she said aloud to herself. "I love him, but not in that way. Although I don't think I could ever marry. I would always be comparing the man with Jesus." For Mary it was more a sort of being on Jesus' wavelength; being close to his thoughts. It was like that between her and brother Lazarus. He understood Jesus. More than ever now.

Mary had not had much conversation with Lazarus since his 'return'. So many relatives, friends and nosey pilgrims had crowded into the house to see him. Most of them came to see and hear about the miracle. Not many wanted to give the praise to Jesus. Then when Jesus came, Lazarus spent hours with him. Mary thought they had things to share which no-one else knew. She had felt a little hurt and left out. That was all part of loving him: glowing when he made time to talk with her and envious of the time he gave to others. Maybe her anointing his feet was attention seeking. "No !" She spoke so loudly she surprised herself. No, the anointing was to say 'thank you', and to say 'sorry'. He had brought Lazarus back to them, and although he was so different now, he WAS still with them, and that was more than enough to be grateful for. But Mary had felt bad for how she had thought of Jesus.

They had sent for him when Lazarus was so ill. Mary knew he would soon be coming to Jerusalem, and believed he would come straight away for Lazarus - and for her. But the days passed and he did not come. Then it was too late. Mary felt he had let them down, and so when Jesus had arrived, her grief made her feel so angry with him she couldn't bring herself to go with Martha to meet him. Then he had asked for her. It was as though he knew what she was feeling and thinking. He always did.

The raising of her brother was a blur in her mind - like a dream - a story from another time. Somehow all the horror, the fear, the dark opening to the tomb, Lazarus walking out in his burial clothes.... the joy, the touch, the tears...was all mixed together in a feeling of awe and otherness. Her happiness for her brother was only matched by her amazement at the power - the Godly power - of Jesus.

It certainly brought attention to Jesus, and not only the enthusiastic acclaim of the villagers. The message reached the Temple within the hour. Rumours came back that the 'religious' were not happy with the event. So, Jesus took his disciples and friends away to Ophra, out on the borders of Ephraim, close to the wilderness. Mary felt hurt once more. She had so wanted to talk to him. She was sure his time was short.

Even tonight there had only been a few moments for just her and Jesus. Maybe in the morning. Morning ! It was morning already. The lamp was fluttering, bright against the pre-dawn blackness. She wondered if he was sleeping. He had been so tired when they returned from the city. Perhaps, like her, he was too tired, too apprehensive to sleep.

The flickering lamp burst into a tall flame, and caught by the breeze, touched Mary's arched palm frond. She rose quickly to quench the burning leaf. Withdrawing and opening her hand, she saw that it held a little pile of ash. Ashes for mourning. The cold shudder went right through her. In that single moment she saw it all; saw things beyond thinking and speaking. There would be ashes. He had said as much, but none of them wanted to believe it. He had even used her anointing of his feet to mention it. He had said that what she had done was like anointing his body for burial.

An unbearable sadness felt like a physical weight inside her. Yet it had to be. Even this morning Jesus seemed to be precipitating it. He had come through the village from Bethphage, riding on a donkey. It was so exciting, the crowds who had come to see Lazarus had a new attraction now. They thronged him. They made a carpet of coats and palms. They had shouted 'Hosanna' ! Then they were gone. On the way to Jerusalem.

Last evening when they returned, Mary had been eager to hear what had happened. John told her. She could talk to John better than the others. He understood more than they did. John was anxious for Jesus. He told Mary how they had gone on towards Jerusalem: How Jesus had stopped and wept over the city: How he had gone into the Temple and turned over the tables of the traders and money-changers.

"The Pharisees weren't happy," John had observed. "We heard a rumour they want to get rid of him. But he seems to accept that. It's almost as though he's inviting it."

"Or maybe can't stop it?" Mary had said.

She told John what Lazarus had said that morning. She had gone into the house carrying her palm branch, after the procession was out of sight. "What's it all about?" she had asked. Lazarus reminded her of the prophecy of Zechariah. He could

remember so much of the scriptures, and he recited the passage for her. "Your king is coming to you. He comes, triumphant and victorious, but humble and riding on a donkey. He will make peace among the nations."

"He's going to be king then," I shouted," said Mary. Lazarus nodded. "But a humble king," he said. "And he will have to suffer and die for his kingdom."

"But why?" I cried.

"Listen," Lazarus replied, "The prophet had more to say. He wrote, 'The shepherd will be killed and the sheep will be scattered.' But then he says how afterwards, 'The Lord will be king over all the earth. Everyone will worship him as God, and know him by the same name.'

Mary looked hard at John, fighting back her tears. "Lazarus believes Jesus will die at this Passover, but also that he will be raised again afterwards. John," she pleaded, "John do you believe that?"

"It's what the Master said," There were tears in John's eyes. "And Lazarus knows Jesus has the power to raise the dead. I don't understand it all, Mary. None of us do. Except perhaps Lazarus. We have to go along with Jesus. We've come this far. There's no turning back. But I am afraid. We all are." John hesitated, then added, "And your brother. He's not safe. The Pharisees want him out of the way too."

"I know," Mary replied. "And Lazarus knows. But he's not worried. He's says he's already died and there's nothing to fear."

The lamp spluttered out. Mary realised the dawn had come. Already streaks of light glinted above the hills. She leaned out of the window to brush the ashes from her hand. Across the street, a date palm was caught in light streaming across the rooftops. The light greened the new growing fronds. It was Mary's sign of hope.

Suddenly she saw it all - the withered dying frond in the window - the ashes of sorrow - the green of resurrection. Sorrow and joy mingled again in an inexpressible experience of awesome glory. "God, I don't understand," she whispered, "But I love him and I trust him, and I will follow him to the end."