

Mary? Which Mary??

One of the challenges with reading the Bible in English is that there are many names which are the same, such as Mary. And because, back in the day, surnames were not "a thing" we are often left wondering which Mary is which.

We know Mary, mother of Jesus.

We know Mary of Magdala, also known as the Apostle to the Apostles.

We know Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus.

We know Mary Simon, Canada's first Indigenous Governor General.

In Hebrew or Aramaic, Mary would be called "MAR-(ee)-yaam".

In French, Mary would be called "Marie"

In Ukrainian, Mary would be called "Mepi"

There is a hymn, written by Ben Wren in 1998 called "A Prophet Woman broke a Jar". There is speculation about who the woman is in the hymn. Is it Mary of Magdala? Is it Mary of Bethany? Is it another Mary?

Verse One - A prophet-woman broke a jar, by Love's divine appointing.

With rare perfume she filled the room, presiding and anointing.

A prophet-woman broke a jar, the sneers of scorn defying.

With rare perfume she filled the room, preparing Christ for dying.

"A Prophet Woman Broke a Jar", Verse 1 © 1998 Ben Wren

In today's gospel from John we know that this Mary is Mary of Bethany. Sister of Martha and Lazarus and friend of Jesus. We have heard of Mary before. Her sister Martha implores Jesus to tell Mary to help with the hospitality meal when he comes to visit. Jesus, instead, tells Martha that the chores can wait, and she should be listening to his teachings as well as her sister Mary.

I was often shocked with Jesus' reaction to Martha, because I thought he should have given a "many hands make light work" kind of speech, yet instead he rebukes an obviously overworked Martha, to sit down and hear what he has to say. If I'd been Martha, I'd have twitched my way through his teaching, because there was still work to do.

In today's reading there's a multitude of layers to dig through in order to get to the deeper meaning and deeper message. At first glance, it appears that Judas is chastising Jesus because he feels Mary has been wasteful. He laments "'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?'" (John 12.5, NRSV)

We then shift to classic editor narrative "(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.)" (John 12.6, NRSV) To be clear, Judas is NOT worried about missing an opportunity to give to the poor. For all we know, Mary of Bethany bought the perfume herself, not from the common purse. Judas would have liked the nard sold and the proceeds to the common purse so he could steal it. He's deflecting and not particularly well.

What happens next has been misinterpreted for eons. "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.'" (John 12.7-8, NRSV).

At first glance it appears Jesus is saying to the apostles, don't worry about the poor, we'll always have the poor. A kind of hand-swatting, stick-handling deflection that poverty is simply something that has always been. I have heard preachers use this phrase as a springboard for the Prosperity Gospel. In short the prosperity gospel is a damaging and false belief that if you have wealth, it's because you have been chosen by God to receive it. If we flip that around it means if you are poor, it's the will of God, you are not the chosen, and you will always BE poor.

Hear me clearly, this is NOT what Jesus is talking about. Let me backup a little bit. The Hebrew Scripture for today is Deuteronomy 15.7-11. If you read this passage alongside the gospel it makes much more sense.

Deuteronomy 15 is about the Sabbath Year, which occurs every seven years. Tucked into the middle of it is teaching about not being tight-fisted when it comes to your neighbour.

Moses says, "If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted towards your needy neighbour. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be." (Deuteronomy 17.7-8, NRSV)

It sounds like this was written for Judas' ears. His rebuke of Mary is ridiculous when read alongside Deuteronomy. Continuing in the same passage, Moses says, "Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake." (Deuteronomy 15.10, NRSV) Moses seems to be speaking directly to Mary in this section.

And going back a little bit more to Deuteronomy 15.4, Moses says "There will, however, be no one in need among you, because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you."

On the surface, the gospel is telling us that waste is evil. Excess is against the Mosaic laws, yet if you go deeper, you see that what Jesus is referring to is a people so blessed by God that there are no poor among them. Digging a little deeper, Jesus says that "you always have the poor with you" - yes, because there will always be spiritual poverty, yet not always physical poverty.

The part that gets missed by everyone EXCEPT Mary, is where Jesus tells the apostles they will not always have him, and that Mary bought the perfume to use for his burial. There is no recorded reaction of anyone at that gathering. The passage ends, the moment has unfolded and the next section takes us into Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. And that is next week's story.

I'm not sure if you heard, but history was made this week in Vatican City. Pope Francis spent last week meeting with Indigenous, Métis and Inuit people from Canada. A lot was riding on these conversations as the Roman Catholic Church, which operated the majority of the Indian Residential Schools in Canada has been upsettingly silent on accepting responsibility for the catastrophic abuses, cultural and physical genocide inflicted on Indigenous, Metis and Inuit children across the country.

The Pope met, listened and nodded as he heard the survivors first-hand accounts of the atrocities inflicted upon them.

In a formal address Pope Francis said,

"I feel shame ... sorrow and shame for the role that a number of Catholics, particularly those with educational responsibilities, have had in all these things that wounded you, and the abuses you suffered and the lack of respect shown for your identity, your culture and even your spiritual values," he said.

"For the deplorable conduct of these members of the Catholic Church, I ask for God's forgiveness and I want to say to you with all my heart, I am very sorry. And I join my brothers, the Canadian bishops, in asking your pardon."

"Dene National Chief Gerald Antoine, one of the lead delegates, compared hearing the apology to the experience of walking through the snow and seeing fresh moose tracks.

"That is the feeling that I have, because there is a possibility," he said moments after the apology.

"Today is a day that we've been waiting for and certainly one that will be uplifted in our history."

[Pope Francis apologizes to Indigenous delegates for 'deplorable' abuses at residential schools – cbc.ca](#)

As I said to a friend of mine when he sent me an article from the New York times on the same subject, it's a good first start.

Our Governor General, Mary Simon is born of a white father and an Inuk mother. As such she was "ineligible" to attend Residential School.

After Grade 6, many of her friends were sent to residential school, but, because her father was white from Manitoba and her mother a unilingual Inuk, they were told she wasn't eligible. Instead, her father became her teacher and home-schooled her. He came to the North as a young man to work for the Hudson's Bay Company, learned to speak the language fluently, and never left.

"During that time, it was difficult," she says. "But in hindsight, it's probably the best thing that's happened to me."

From a Nunavik day school to Rideau Hall: Governor General Mary Simon reflects on reconciliation journey – aptnnews.ca

The legacy of the Indian Residential School system is far from over, even with an historic apology from the Pope. It joins apologies from the Prime Minister of Canada, and the leaders of the United Church of Canada and the Anglican Church of Canada. The discovery of the now 1,800 unmarked graves found at twenty former IRS sites is but the tip of the iceberg of the 139 Indian Residential Schools across Canada.

For Mary Simon she describes Reconciliation as a way of life, rather than a singular moment in time. It is a time which will never end, especially as more and more unmarked graves are found. This work will take decades, and will cost millions, which is why our opportunity for Almsgiving today is the work of the Healing Fund(s).

Today's gospel teaches us that we must look beyond the surface. If we did not know to do that, the first set of unmarked graves would not have been found. Senator Murray Sinclair, former chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was interviewed following the discovery of 215 unmarked graves outside the Tk'emlups te Secwépemc First Nation in Kamloops.

The TRC's final report in 2015 recorded 3,201 deaths, though at the time Sinclair estimated that at least 6,000 children, if not more, died as a result of their school experience, based on his work with the Commission.

Speaking to The Current, Sinclair said the true figure "could be in the 15-25,000 range, and maybe even more."

Murray Sinclair calls for inquiry into residential school burial sites, more support for survivors

www.cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/the-current-for-june-2-2021

I agree with Her Majesty, Mary Simon, Governor General that Reconciliation is a way of life. It is a way of life that has deeply rooted trauma in our Indigenous, Métis and Inuit communities. It is up to us, as settlers, to walk with and listen to our Indigenous, Métis and Inuit cousins.

Our ancestors took from their ancestors and we need to make reparation. Land Acknowledgments are a start, yet hopefully not a means to an end in facing the shameful history of Indian Residential Schools. There is much more work to be done, and we must take the time to listen, to be taught and to work with our first nations communities.

For too long, we have dictated the way to go. Now we must ask for a way to follow and learn.

As the Creator has blessed the land of our ancestors who came to this country, so too has the Creator blessed these lands from the time of their Creation. The Ktunaxa have settled on the land we know as the Elk Valley for 10,000 years. Their full Creation story takes days to tell, but you can find much shorter forms of it online.

As we understand what it is to be a blessed people, we must also recognise our cousins as blessed. We may not speak the same language i.e. English or Ktunaxa, yet our hearts beat and our brains think. May our lips use words only of love and a desire to learn.

At her installation as Governor General, a traditional Inuk oil candle remained lit. Mary Simon

“spoke about the need to balance the “tension of the past” with the “promise of the future,” and vowed to carry out her work with “humility and purpose.”

“I am honoured, humbled and ready to be Canada's first Indigenous governor general,” Simon said in her speech.

“I have heard from Canadians who describe a renewed sense of possibility for our country and hope that I can bring people together.

I have heard from Canadians who have challenged me to bring a renewed purpose to the office of governor general to help Canadians deal with the issues we are facing."

Mary Simon is now officially Canada's first Indigenous governor general
www.globalnews.ca

Mary of Magdala was the first to see Jesus on the day of his resurrection. In Luke's Gospel she had washed his feet with her tears, dried them with her hair and anointed them with perfume. (Luke 7:36-50)

Mary of Bethany pleaded with Jesus to bring her brother Lazarus back to life. She learned at his feet, she heard his lessons and when the time was right, she bought some expensive nard and filling the house with its heady fragrance, she wiped his feet with her hair and anointed him with perfume, in preparation, as Jesus said, for his burial, which was to come sooner than anyone had ever dreamed.

Which Mary bore the greater burden?
Which Mary made the biggest sacrifice?
Which Mary has the largest legacy?

The answer is Mary of Magdala, Mary of Bethany, and Mary of Kangiqsualujjuaq, also known as Governor General.

For these women, past and present, for the one who has loved us like no other, who loved us into existence and will remain with us always, we give thanks.

Amen.

The Reverend Andrea L. Brennan, Incumbent
Elk Valley Ecumenical Shared Ministry
Fernie Knox United & Christ Church Anglican, Fernie, BC
Sermon for Lent 5 - 6 April 2022 – John 12:1-8