

I come in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

It was believed by the ancient Greeks that the goddess Athena created the olive tree. Ancient peoples used olive oil for consumption and cooking, perfume, anointment for the dead, soap, lights, and to anoint kings and nobles.

Hippocrates called olive oil “the great healer”, and was the first known medical practitioner to use olive oil-based ointments to treat wounds and traumas. Galen, a 2<sup>nd</sup>-century Greek physician, praised it for its positive effects on health. By the Middle Ages, olive oil continued to reveal new curative properties as it became a well-known remedy for sore throats, cuts and bruises.

In Judaism, the mitzvah (a holy duty) of “Bikkurim” (dedicating the first fruits) calls for bringing olives, as well as the other fruits, to the Temple in Jerusalem, and comes with a special blessing to say when one eats these fruits.

Christianity has embraced the healing power of olive oil and uses it in its religious rites, anointings, illumination, and is associated with the work of the Holy Spirit. We keep 3 containers of Holy Oil in our ambry (Latin for ‘chest’). It’s the little storage cabinet in the wall in the sanctuary. We have the Oil of Catechumens, Oil of the Sick, and Oil of Chrism. These are all blessed by the Bishop at the Annual Chrism Mass.

The Oil of Catechumen is pure olive oil that is used when someone begins their journey into Christianity. It is used as a sign asking God to instill them with wisdom for discernment and with the strength necessary to avoid evil during their inquiry into the Christian faith and their preparation for a life with Christ.

The Oil of the Sick, also pure olive oil, reminds us its own healing properties, as well as God's healing power and abundant grace. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, we can be healed from physical, emotional, or spiritual ailments. In James, we hear, (James 5:13-15)

<sup>13</sup> Are any among you suffering? They should pray. <sup>14</sup> Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. <sup>15</sup> The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.

This is the Holy Oil that we will be using today.

Finally, we have the Oil of Chrism. This, too, is pure olive oil, but with a balsam additive. Balsam was historically made from the wood from trees belonging to terebinth family, which would include the pistachio or cashew tree – (the source of turpentine). It gives the oil a bit of a pine tree-ish fragrance.

Chrism symbolizes strength, and signifies the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is used to consecrate someone or something to God's service. It is used at Baptism, to welcome the newly baptized into the Christian family.

Holy Chrism is also used at Confirmation and Ordinations, asking the Holy Spirit to give them strength and wisdom in their service to Christ.

Today's Gospel is bursting with imagery and depth. We hear how Mary of Bethany (Lazarus' and Martha's sister) anoints Jesus' feet. In Jewish tradition, Passover requires the sacrificial offering of an unblemished lamb. A lamb would be selected, and six days prior to Passover, it would be inspected to verify that it was unblemished. If so, its feet would be anointed. Our story today occurred six days before Passover, and Mary anoints Jesus' feet, a sign of his impending sacrifice as the unblemished lamb of God, a perfect sacrifice.

From another perspective, we see Mary, in an act of humility and respect, demonstrate **the true discipleship** that Jesus will describe later in the gospel when he washes the disciple's feet. Washing the feet of others was a job for servants and slaves.

In an extraordinary move, Mary anoints his feet with nard. Judas balks at it, making it known that nard was very expensive (equal to a person's annual wages at the time). Nard was derived from a plant that grew in the Himalayan mountains and had to be shipped long distances to the Holy Land.

The Romans used it to make perfumes. The Hebrews in the Temple used it as an **incense offering**, and was considered the “fragrance of God.” In Old Testament times perfumes and oils were used to prepare a body for burial, which was why the act of anointing Jesus’ feet with nard prior to His crucifixion added to the symbolism of the act.

Picture her, pouring oil and perfume on Jesus’ feet – oil that symbolizes being set apart, oil that offers strength, endurance, and healing, a fragrance that is as ethereal as the Holy Spirit (strong, yet gentle). **Then**, as Mary wipes his feet, the nard mingles with her hair, uniting her with Jesus, creating a profound and intimate loving action that allows the Spirit to soak into her being and permeate the room. As the perfume permeates the room, all present are invited into the moment.

We cannot ignore that this anointing is preparing Jesus for his impending trial. He will need extraordinary physical, mental, and spiritual strength and endurance. Both his human and divine natures will be put to the test. He will experience human abandonment, suffering and fear.

Jesus dismisses Judas’ objections. It is a time in which Jesus needs strength, endurance, and assurance of God’s promises. Jesus needs his body to be anointed while he is alive, and not wasted on his lifeless body.

It is true that the world will always have the poor, but that does not mean that we should dismiss opportunities to tend to our own needs for healing and strength. After all, how better to meet the needs of others when we are physically, emotionally, and spiritually well?

Today, I invite you to participate in this loving and intimate moment in our Gospel story. If you wish, I will anoint you with oil, asking the Holy Spirit to permeate through your very being, and to bring God's healing to you, and to give you the strength to endure anything that may come your way. To help you live into the moment, a drop of nard has been added into the oil, which will leave a soft fragrance. Allow your imagination to take you into that room with Mary and Jesus, participating in the humble act of anointing, placing yourself into God's providence and love, finding healing and comfort in the fragrance of God.

In this anointing, you are reminded that you have been set apart as a beloved creation by God. In this anointing, you can welcome the presence and intimacy of the Holy Spirit within you, beside you, and around you. Allow all of your senses to come alive in this sacramental rite. See the oil, hear the words of healing, feel the sensation of the oil as it is placed upon you, and come to know the gentle fragrance of God. Be present in the moment. Be healed. Amen.