

symbol of love and preparedness. What can we give to our Lord today which means the same? Personally, I try to meet my financial obligations to 'give to the poor', but I have always hoped that the other things I do for the Lord will also prove to be a resource for other people that only I can give. If all of us in the church of God had the same attitude of offering our all to the Lord, together with a respect for what each of us offer, then we might break some new ground. Everyone has different and untapped resources to assist in the proclamation of the Gospel.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Have you ever given something away of high value and at great risk? Can you remember what this feels like? Put yourself in the position of the woman in this story and let the Lord God inspire you to greater heights of self giving.*
- *Pray for the poor of the world, who are not just the victims of society today, but have so much to offer the world which it does not perceive and does not show any willingness to accept. Pray that the gifts of the poor will be accepted by God's people.*

Final Prayer

Almighty God, You use the most meagre of our offerings, and the most extravagant. In Your Kingdom You do not have comparative measures, but You value everything according to its heavenly purpose. Use the gift of our lives according to the purposes for which You have created us; and liberate us in Your service, we pray. AMEN

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, You came into this world in obedience to the Father and in total commitment to those You came to save. Break through the problems of sin and wickedness that dominate our secular world, and come into our lives this very day. Assure us of the forgiveness of our sins when we turn to you for help and give us strength to live according to what we know is right and true, so that we may enter the presence of God with joy and thanksgiving. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Fire Services

Pray for the families of those who work in the fire service, and who know that their loved ones face danger in their work. Pray for those who have lost relatives in the fire services.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for those suffering with cholera in southern Africa*
- *Pray for all those whose prospects are bleak this Christmas*
- *Thank God for the joys of preparing for Christmas*

Meditation

Save Your people O Lord:

Bring to light what is useless, ineffective and irrelevant within us
And replace it with purpose, power and vitality.

Uncover what is rotten, broken, and diseased within us
And work within us to heal, mend, and make whole again.

Reveal the prejudice, insecurity and intolerance within us
And redirect our hearts to be open, secure and free.

Expose the unease, rebellion and un-forgiveness within us
And enlighten us with Your salvation, justice and love.

Root out the complacency, presumption and conceit within us
And restore Your authority, Your power and Your Glory.

Save Your people, O Lord.

Bible Study - Matthew 26:6-13

⁶ Now while Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, ⁷ a woman approached him with an alabaster jar of expensive ointment, and she poured it on his head as he sat at the table. ⁸ When the disciples saw it, they were angry and said, "Why this waste?" ⁹ This ointment could have been sold for a large sum, and the money given to the poor."

¹⁰ Aware of this, Jesus said to them, "Why are you giving this woman a hard time? She has done something precious for me. ¹¹ You will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. ¹² By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial. ¹³ Amen, I tell you, wherever this

gospel is proclaimed throughout the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her."

Review

This is an amazing story of passion, commitment and faith, coming after what we read yesterday about Jesus' own sense of impending death and the plots of the authorities to kill Him (26:1-5). At the heart of this story is a woman who simply approached Jesus and anointed Him with expensive oil; and this took place in Bethany, where Jesus had come to be amongst supportive friends away from the enemies who were plotting his death. During the day, He had been in the Jerusalem Temple arguing with the scribes and Pharisees (chaps. 22-25), but in Bethany, he came to relax at the house of a social outcast; a leper (26:6). The woman who anointed Jesus understood that Jesus was indeed about to die, and this was a very different attitude to that of the disciples (26:8) who continued to struggle with what was happening. This story is full of meaning, and we do not want to fall into the same trap as the disciples and fail to see the spiritual significance of what was happening before their eyes.

The house and the women This story is different in all four Gospels. In John's Gospel (12:1-8) the house belongs to Lazarus, Martha and Mary, and the woman who pours the ointment is Mary (Mary the disciple, not Mary, Jesus' mother), and Judas objects to the anointing on financial grounds (John 12:4). In Mark (14:3-9), the story is similar to Matthew, because the house belongs to Simon the Leper and the woman is unidentified. Matthew mentions that the disciples objected to what happened, but Mark does not say who objected. Luke records a story (7:36-50) which is so different that many think it as a totally separate event, yet some of its features are strikingly close to ours; a woman who was a sinner anointed Jesus with a jar of 'ointment' in the house of a 'Pharisee'. Whatever happened, we will look at this story from Matthew's point of view, and study the stories in the other Gospels similarly when we reach them in this series of studies.

One of the big questions asked by people who have read this passage is why does Jesus go to the house of 'Simon the Leper'? This question then implies others. Is the designation 'Leper' applied because Simon is a 'cured' leper? It would be very strange if this were so, for who would want people to know that they had been in contact with the disease, even if they had been made ritually clean by a priest. An answer to this conundrum provided by the Early Church, which believed that Simon was the leper cured by Jesus in Matthew 8:1-4 (having travelled to Galilee from Bethany), and was famous as the first person healed of this disease by Jesus. There is no way of checking this, but the story is certainly feasible.

Lastly, it is interesting that Jesus should be in the company of a 'leper' (healed or not). The Passover rules stipulated that contact with a leper constituted uncleanness which barred a person from the festive meal. It may be that Simon's past or present leprosy was mentioned in the story to show that Jesus was willing to fly in the face of regulations for the sake of including people who were otherwise excluded from the things of God.

The anointing - why this waste? Anointing with perfumed oils was a normal part of preparation for feasting in the 'well to do' parts of Jerusalem. Expensive perfumes were the preserve of the rich, and they were kept in costly thin-necked alabaster jars from Egypt. However, poorer people saved and kept such anointing oils to prepare the dead at funerals. Today, we buy and use perfumes for cosmetic purposes only, but this should not stop us appreciating the two themes of this incident of anointing and preparation for burial.

What happened to Jesus was extraordinary and unexpected. The woman poured the perfume on Jesus' head (26:6), and the manner in which this was done is a reminder of how kings of the royal line of David were anointed (see the anointing of David by Samuel, 1

Sam 16:12,13, for example). This reminds us that the word 'anointed' (the Greek word 'christos') translates the Hebrew word for 'Messiah'! Remarkably, an unnamed woman recognised Jesus anointed Jesus as Messiah, at a time when the disciples were still struggling to come to terms with the truth about their Master!

Then, when Jesus spoke about what had happened, He likened it to His anointing for burial (26:12). This was important, because if we read the story of the death of Jesus, Matthew does not describe any anointing or perfuming of Jesus' body (from 27:57 to 28:10) apart from the wrapping of His body in a clean linen cloth (27:59). Because crucified criminals were not allowed by the authorities to be embalmed or anointed, it was therefore important for Matthew to include this 'anointing' for burial. No expense was spared in anointing a body for burial, and so Jesus accepted this gift without questioning the woman's motives.

Lastly, although we have to jump ahead in the story a little in order to appreciate this, Jesus contrasts the expensive quality of the perfume used to anoint Him with the relatively paltry sum Judas received for handing Him over to the authorities (26:14-16).

The disciple's response Even if the disciples were coming to terms with Jesus' final journey to the Cross, they did not appear to have understood the woman's actions. They dismissed her because she was a woman, in the same way they had dismissed as a nuisance the children who came to Jesus (19:13-15). For them, Passover was a special time of piety, with traditions such as special collections for the poor (see also John 13:29), and they saw these rituals as their most important duty rather than trying to understand the spiritual significance of what the woman had done. They were not able to see the anointing as anything more than a waste, and showed an inability either to appreciate the beauty of what had been done for Jesus or to compare what this woman had done with the awful rejection of Jesus by the chief priests and elders in the Temple, only a few hours earlier.

Jesus immediately knew what was happening to Him; He said to the disciples, 'Why are you giving this woman a hard time? She has done something precious for me' (26:10). In these few words, He recognised the downtrodden position of the women, subject to criticism from the disciples, and probably unable to reply. Then, His words 'You will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me' represent the new focus of Matthew's Gospel on Jesus' journey to the Cross for the salvation of all. People criticise this statement by Jesus to this day, but in so doing fail to recognise the supreme value of what Jesus was doing for all people, rich and poor alike. What the woman did was a unique act of devotion to Jesus that proclaimed the significance of His death. She helped to serve the needs of all humanity, rich and poor alike, by ministering to the One who would bring Salvation. No-one would ever again have the chance to prepare Jesus for burial as this woman did, and she took her opportunity.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Can we have any sympathy for the disciples in this story? Can you find a way to excuse their ignorance and sustain the core spiritual meaning of the story?
2. Is it possible to make a financial division between what is purely "for the Lord" and what is to be given to the poor?
3. Discuss who you believe this woman was, and why she did what she did.

Discipleship

Personal comment:

This passage of scripture reminds us that what we give to God becomes His resource to use for the salvation of the whole world. The woman gave her perfume, and it was a rich