

you giving her a hard time? She has done something very precious for me' (14:6). In those few words, He recognised the downtrodden position of women generally, but His response would have shocked those present.

Jesus' reply that 'You will always have the poor with you ... but you will not always have me' (14:7) has been criticised even to this day as a failure by Jesus to understand the needs of the poor and the disciple's legitimate concern. But there is no need for us to question Jesus' motives; money was never the issue for Him, only words and deeds, and Jesus' ministry showed understanding and care for the poor over and over again. The truth is that the Gospel of Mark is now focussed on Jesus Himself and what happens to Him. It is amazing that people make the same mistake today and do not see how scripture is unfolding to bring us the eternal message of salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus, which is the greatest treasure anyone can possess. At the heart of the Gospel we do not find money, but the love of God in Jesus, and the poor we have with us need that love in no greater or lesser measure than anyone else. As Jesus said, we must always help the poor, but one special gift to the Messiah before His death was irrelevant to that need. It was relevant to His death.

Application

Even today, if in our minds we separate out what we do for Jesus as different from what we do for the poor, then we have made a great mistake. Firstly, what we do for Jesus and what we do for the poor are one and the same thing in the Kingdom of Heaven, and secondly Jesus' burial never takes place again; we cannot revisit the scenario. We are called to give our all to God because of Jesus' work for our salvation, and God calls us to do what we can for the poor with His resources and ours; resources which are both spiritual and practical.

Furthermore, when Jesus prophesied 'wherever this gospel is proclaimed throughout the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her', I wonder whether the prophecy has been fulfilled? It is a wonderful story but still misunderstood. Have we lost an opportunity by not fulfilling Jesus' word? This woman ministered real care to Jesus after a tough day of confrontation, offering back to her Lord an extraordinary generosity of spiritual love which reflected the all-embracing love of the Father. She knew what Jesus needed as a human being, and she also recognised Him, by her anointing, as the Messiah; overcoming obstacles of sexism and maybe also class to do what she did. The extravagance and beauty of her worshipful actions won Jesus' praise and He defended her against the men of the house. The whole story is about one who recognised Jesus for who He really was, and then responded appropriately with supreme generosity. The whole church would do well to spend time reflecting upon this story, and using the example of this woman in its proclamation and preaching.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss how you think that the religious authorities would have reacted to hearing about this incident. Why would they have objected?
2. Is it right for us to reserve special, expensive things 'for God', such as great art and buildings, and the possessions of the church?
3. What should we be doing for the poor to honour what Jesus said to His disciples in this passage?

Discipleship

Those who are following the series of discipleship suggestions in Lent are writing a series of reflections on what Jesus felt as He came closer to His death and resurrection. There are many things we can write down about Jesus' feeling within this passage. The story oozes the character and vitality of Jesus at a critical moment in His last days. I wonder what He thought about His disciples, about His friends in Bethany, about the woman, and eventually about Judas? Much was happening, and all at once.

Final Prayer

Great God of love, come to the hearts of the poor and downtrodden who need the hope that You alone can give; and may we, knowing the privileges of the life we have been given, do all in our power to serve You, the One who does what is right for all people. Thank You, God of love: AMEN

Prayer

Lord Jesus, You are the guardian of our days, and You lead us on our personal journey of life according to God's eternal plan. Keep us close to the pathway of salvation and committed to following the will of the Father; remind us sharply of the consequences when we are tempted to wander, and place before us the sure hope of completing our journey with the hope of glory for all eternity. All praise to You, Lord Jesus, guardian of our days. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Peace

Ask God to grant the gift of peace to men and women who find it hard to live together, having been married and come to a place of unhappiness or division. Pray for those who counsel people who have marriage problems, and pray that the Church may be a witness to the love and reconciliation which comes from God and empowers people to deal with problems.

Meditation

When the enemy finds our faults and failings

And tries every way to hold us down;

May we be strong and sure, in conviction and faith.

When the events of our day turn from good to bad,

Shattering all our hopes and dreams;

May we grasp Your providence, guidance and care.

When the people we work with turn sharply against us,

And manipulate what's said and done;

May we stay pure, in thought and word and deed.

When the passage of time yields no healing or hope

As our prayers remain unanswered;

May we accept that Your will lies beyond us, for now.

When the rest we long for lies too far in the distance

And we do not know when we'll find rest;

May we refuse to panic, and find peace in You.

For with You, 'all things work together for good'.

Bible Study - Mark 14:1-11

¹ The Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread were about to take place in two days time, and the chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by trickery, and kill him. ² 'Not during the festival,' they thought, 'or there might be a riot among the people.'

³ While Jesus was at Bethany, reclining at table in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, pure nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. ⁴ But there were some there who said to one another indignantly, 'Why has this perfume been wasted?' ⁵ This ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred day's wages, and the money given to the poor.' And they spoke harshly to her. ⁶ 'Leave her alone,' Jesus said, 'why are you giving her a hard time? She has done something very precious for me. ⁷ You will always have the poor with you, and whenever you wish you can show kindness to them; but you will not always have me. ⁸ She has done what she was able to do; she has anointed my body beforehand, ready for its burial. ⁹ Amen, I tell you, wherever the Gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will be told in memory of her.'

¹⁰ Then Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Him to them. ¹¹ When they heard this, they were delighted, and promised to give him money. So he began to look out for an opportunity to betray him.

Review

After the stress of the verbal attacks on Jesus by the authorities in the Temple, He returned to the home of His friends in Bethany. Whilst there, He was anointed with oil by a woman in a deeply touching display of blessing. Yet part of the beauty of the story lies in the fact that Mark mixed this beautiful story with reminders of the tension felt by everyone around Jesus in the days before He died. He records that the 'chief priests and scribes' were looking for a way to arrest Jesus but held back because of the number of people in Jerusalem (14:1,2). Then, the powerful story of Jesus' anointing at Bethany is interrupted by some of those present who felt that what had been done was a waste of good money (14:4,5,6), and then as a consequence of what happened, Mark describes Judas Iscariot as taking the fatal decision to betray Jesus to the authorities (14:10,11).

Bethany was a little way out of Jerusalem beyond the Mount of Olives, and although Jesus had gone there to get away from those plotting his death, He could not escape what God had planned for Him. The anointing took everyone by surprise, but it foreshadowed Jesus' death, as He Himself admitted (14:8), and His death was all but guaranteed when Judas Iscariot went to the chief priests (14:10,11). The story strongly implies, but does not say directly, that Judas decided to take this course of action after his personal disgust at what had just happened.

One of the fascinating things about this story is this; it is recorded in each of the four Gospels in very different ways. 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); also in John, Judas personally objects to the anointing on financial grounds (John 12:4). Mark and Matthew are very similar; the house is that of Simon the Leper and the woman is not identified. Matthew mentions that the disciples objected to what happened, but Mark does not actually say who makes the objection. Luke's version of this story is completely different (7:36-50) and reads like an incident in the middle of Jesus' earlier teaching ministry, yet some of its features are strikingly close to our passage; Luke records a 'sinful' woman anointing Jesus with a jar of ointment in the house of a Pharisee. These different approaches to what happened reflect the recollections of those present, who passed the story on by word of mouth in different ways and for different reasons. However, there is little doubt that this was an important incident, and one of the more remarkable events of Jesus' life. Jesus Himself suggested this when He said 'wherever this gospel is proclaimed throughout the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her' (14:9).

In the midst of everything Jesus endured in those days before His death, a woman who appeared to understand what God required of Him anointed him. In her actions, she prepared Jesus for His death, showing that she understood what Jesus had been saying about Himself for some time (e.g. 10:33). Some could not see the spiritual meaning of what was happening and regarded the whole event as merely a waste of money. Now, some still maintain this opinion today, and question Jesus' acceptance of such an anointing when the oil, or its value if sold, could have benefitted others.

It can only be emphasised that Jesus knew what He was doing; He knew that the great work to which he was called was to die in order to bring salvation to the whole world, a gift far more precious than any earthly ointment, precious stone, gift or money. The supreme generosity of the gift was a prophetic foretaste of the supreme generosity of God, and this is why Jesus (14:9) regarded the story so highly. It is worth considering whether preachers should pay as much attention to this story in the days before Easter as they do Jesus' famous 'foot-washing' (John 13), and fulfil Jesus' own prophecy about what was done for Him.

Going Deeper

But we do have more to find within the text of great interest, and we will now explore further the setting of this story and some of the details it contains. We will look at the setting the story, the anointing itself and what it means, and the response of others to this amazing event.

The house at Bethany

One of the big questions about this whole passage is to whom does this house belong, and why does Jesus know those who live there? Mark tells us that it was the home of 'Simon the Leper' (14:3). In John's Gospel, the same incident takes place at the home of Lazarus (John 21:1), so

is Simon perhaps the father of Lazarus, and also Lazarus' sisters Mary and Martha? This is the simplest explanation, but another question now emerges, which is why was Simon called 'the Leper'? Is the designation 'Leper' applied because Simon had once been a leper and was now cured of the disease? Under normal circumstances it would be doubtful that anyone would wish it to be known that they had ever had contact with the disease, even if they had been made ritually clean by a priest. However, the Early Church solved this conundrum by coming to the conclusion that Simon was the leper cured by Jesus in Mark 1:40-45. If this was the case, he must have travelled to Galilee where Jesus began His ministry to obtain this healing, and as one of the first people Jesus healed, it is suggested that a special friendship built up which is reflected in his family's hospitality of Jesus towards the end of His ministry, as in this passage today. If this is all true, then Simon would have had a reputation as the first leper cured by Jesus, and in the time of the Early Church would have been known as 'Simon the Leper'. We would be foolish to speculate more than this!

In addition to this, it is significant that Jesus was in the company of a leper (whether healed or not) prior to the Passover. The normal Passover rules (rabbinical, and not from the Old Testament), said that contact with a leper constituted uncleanness which barred a person from the festive meal. It may well be that Simon's leprosy (past or present) was mentioned to show that Jesus did not turn anyone away or exclude them from His own work of salvation.

The anointing – why the waste?

Anointing with perfumed oils was a normal part of feasting in the more 'well to do' homes in Jerusalem and Israel, and was part of the washing and preparation routines which were normal before a formal meal. Perfumes such as nard were the preserve of the rich, and were usually kept in expensive thin-necked alabaster jars from Egypt. However, poorer people saved and kept these expensive anointing oils from whenever they had the opportunity to acquire them for use in funeral rites, honouring the dead and preparing them for burial. Today, we buy and use perfumes for cosmetic purposes only, but this should not stop us appreciating the way in which this story plays on these two themes of special anointing and preparation for burial.

What happened to Jesus was extraordinary for the day, and unexpected. Firstly, the anointing was rather extravagant, for the woman liberally poured expensive perfume on Jesus' head (14:3), and the very mention of the alabaster jar alerts us to the fact that this perfume had been prepared for the rich. Jesus' anointing is a reminder of the fact that the kings of Israel and Judah were anointed (see the anointing of David by Samuel in 1 Sam 16:12,13), and after Jesus' lifetime ministry of service to people, this is a reminder of His kingly status. The word 'anointed' in Greek is the word 'Christos', and translates the Hebrew word 'Messiah', and this adds greatly to our understanding of what was happening; the woman recognised Jesus for who He was, and anointed Him as the Messiah, the Son of David!

When Jesus responded to the furore which developed around Him, He likened what had happened to His anointing for burial (14:8). We do not know whether the woman who anointed Him appreciated the fact that Jesus had come to Jerusalem to die, but it is clear that her anointing was in fact the only anointing Jesus received for His death, certainly as recorded in Mark's Gospel (and also Matthew). Mark presents Jesus as crucified as a pauper, and anointing and embalming would have been banned at a crucifixion. So in this incident, Jesus was anointed for burial prior to His death, and because no expense was usually spared in anointing a body for burial, and this is why Jesus accepted this gift without questioning the woman's motives. The fact that those around Jesus did not understand this only exposes their inability to understand what Jesus had been telling them about His reason for coming to Jerusalem ever since the incident at Caesarea Philippi (8:29f.)

The negative reaction to Jesus' anointing

The disciples were still not able to accept what was happening to Jesus, and this is shown in their rejection of the woman who anointed him. They do not appear to have understood her actions, and by complaining about the money, they also dismissed her as a woman, just as they had earlier dismissed the children who came to Jesus as a nuisance (10:13f.). For them, Passover was a special time of special 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 recognising the radical importance of what was happening in front of them. Jesus, however, immediately recognised what was going on and jumped to the defence of the woman, 'Why are