

Well folks, we are taking a break from our series on Ephesians as we begin to think more about the Journey of Jesus towards the cross as we approach Holy Week. But what a journey. Now any journey usually starts with a plan of where you want to go, but for Jesus this plan has been there throughout his life. It's not that long ago at Christmas that we read of Simeon taking the child Jesus in his arms and declaring these words "*This child is destined to cause many in Israel to fall, and many others to rise. He has been sent as a sign from God, but many will oppose him*".

And it's so true. Many will rise, but others will show their opposition to what Jesus is all about.

If you have your bibles I would encourage you to open them, or look the passage up on your phone app. So as we begin let me pray.

[Prayer]

So the context of our reading is that we are 2 days before Passover. Passover would begin on the Thursday at sundown. Sunset Wednesday to sunset Thursday would be the day before Passover. So our reading has us somewhere between Tuesday night and Wednesday day time. Jesus and his disciples have been staying, not in Jerusalem, but in Bethany, a town to the southeast of Jerusalem, just over the Mount of Olives. And it was common during the feast days for pilgrims to stay on the outskirts of the city since the city was so packed with people coming for the festival. To give you an idea of the scale of these gatherings, the historian Josephus of the time recalls that Rome wanted to know the numbers coming into the city, so the chief priests were requested to take a count. He says "These priests found the number of the sacrifices was two hundred and fifty-six thousand five hundred; which, if we assume no more than ten feasted together, amounts to two million seven hundred thousand and two hundred persons". Now those numbers may be exaggerated but we are confident that half a million people at least would have gathered in the city. So that's the context as Jesus sits in the house of Simon the leper where in these last days he's surrounded with ordinary people.

Mark's account of this intimate setting, is written very deliberately as a bit of sandwich. What do I mean by that? Well if you look at the reading this morning you will see that it begins with the scheming of the teachers and priests to have Jesus killed. It ends with Judas siding up alongside the priests to betray Jesus all for money. That's the bread, and then the filling in the middle is a story about a woman.

Mark has intentionally done this so that we can see the contrast, a contrast between waste and beauty. Why would he do that? Why does he want us to see this? Mark as a disciple of Christ is aware of the difficulties involved in being a follower. Mark knows how hard it can be to follow Jesus. And so I believe that Mark deliberately structured this passage to give his readers assurance that when they are tempted to doubt the worship of Jesus and whether it is really worth it, they will remember that Jesus is worth it all. In other words, when Jesus occupies the centre of your life, it doesn't matter what comes your way, you know that it is more valuable than anything else that this world offers you. That's the point of this passage. And when life got hard for those disciples, and when it gets hard for us, we're supposed to see this passage as a reminder that Jesus is worth expensive worship. So how much does he mean to us really?

So let's look a wee bit more at the detail.

The question I have is this - Who in this passage is doing something beautiful and who is doing something of waste?

The passage starts and ends with those who oppose Jesus. And right in the middle is the story of this unnamed woman and what she does. It is so unusual in the culture that the focus would turn to this woman. Women were not necessarily invited to have a seat at the table. And isn't that something incredible about this story. Where society would not lift up women, here Jesus puts her centre stage. Of all the people in the room who should have a significant role, she's the one who truly understands what's happening. In the midst of all that's going on, this woman is overwhelmed with grief, and she knows what is coming on Friday for Jesus. She is about to display her love and feelings for Christ. It's incredible that she only gets one verse recorded of her actions, verse 3. She comes and anoints Jesus' head with an ointment, a fragrant oil made from nard, a flowering plant that came from as far away as India. This perfume was so expensive because it was rare. It would have been imported to Egypt. There was no other perfume as precious as this in the known world. Everyone would have known just how valuable it was. It was the equivalent of a year's wage. And it says the woman broke the jar open. She doesn't uncork it, she doesn't remove the seal. She breaks the bottle as if to say, "I'm using all of this for this moment alone", rendering the vessel completely useless for anything after. And it's the value of this perfume that causes a small uproar in the house about what the woman has decided to do with something so precious.

You may remember that the singer Michael Jackson had a pet chimpanzee. He was called Bubbles. Jackson took Bubbles everywhere. However you probably don't know that Jackson in his bequest left Bubbles \$2 million payable to him upon his death. Such was his affection and love for an animal. This bequest is far from the most extravagant example, but I'm sure many of you will consider it to be a complete waste. Well for the folks who watched this woman open the bottle of nard and pour it over Jesus' head, they considered it an incredible waste.

So why did she anoint his head with this oil? Well anointing the head of a guest was a very common gesture of blessing and honour at the Jewish feasts. You might remember David's words from Psalm 23: '*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows*'. But this gesture may have meant more. This anointing may have been a statement confirming that Jesus was the indeed Messiah. And what does Messiah mean? - it means, "anointed one". And for Jesus he is thinking ahead to his death as oils and perfumes would have been used for burial, so he rebukes the others in the room and says "She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial". Jesus knew the value of what she had done.

And even though that moment of anointing was so precious, there were some who just saw it as waste and pointless. Imagine what this scene must have been like. To have a moment of holy, lavish worship—a moment of such intensity and intimacy- and then to have that moment interrupted by two-faced insiders that did not give a care about Jesus or the poor. It's a bit like this illustration. I have 2 weddings in a couple of week's time. Imagine you are sitting in the congregation. Up near the front something special is happening. You can't take your eyes off it – two people so committed to one another. And then, you hear a sound behind you: someone having a laugh at something. So you look. And you see a man in the back row, eating and drinking. He takes out sweets and doesn't worry about the noise of opening the wrapper; he eats an apple and throws the core in the aisle. He opens a can of coke and belches. Then you hear him lean over to the guest next to him and says to him, "These flowers, they're such a waste of money – he'll have left her before the year is out I bet you." You want to shout, "Why don't you just shut up! This moment is so special and sacred, and you're talking over it. And not only are you talking over it, but you dare criticize the ones who participate in such beautiful worship".

Well if you can picture that, then you have a sense of what is going on in Mark 14 and the passion that would have been in Jesus' voice as he says "Leave her alone... why are you

bothering her. She has done a beautiful thing to me” (v. 7). Before Jesus said this, the woman would have felt so small but Jesus comes to her rescue. Mark wants you to feel that tension, that rudeness interrupting such expensive worship. The same passage in John 12 tells us who one of the persons is that’s grumbling about wasting perfume instead of giving it to the poor – it’s Judas. And it observes that Judas said this ‘not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it’. Judas only cared for himself, but then again who doesn’t from time to time.

It’s probably fair to say that everyone in that house was a devoted follower. But to *what* they were devoted is a question we have to consider. Many of the disciples seem to be devoted to a cause although at this stage it’s hard to know what some of them think. We see in other passages that they’ve asked for places of honour in Christ’s kingdom, and who will be the greatest.

In contrast to the kind of devotion we see expressed by some of the disciples, this woman is totally devoted to Jesus. She understands the true value that comes from it. Yes, she is committed to the cause, but it is her saviour’s cause, and he comes before anything. In considering this jar of nard, she didn’t first see a resource to assist the poor. She saw instead a resource to assist in worship. She was in the presence of the Messiah, the King of Israel. Her agenda was driven by adoration. Her extravagance here is not a sign of her carelessness, but of her total devotion to Jesus.

This woman is so overwhelmed by the presence of Jesus, she had to share it. And Jesus says to everyone else gathered that she is the one who gets it. So in verse 9 Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her”. You see 2,000 years later this story is still being told, and with only one verse demonstrating this woman’s actions it shows us how we are to respond in our lives to Jesus.

What an extravagant model for us for how we are to value Jesus in our lives. The contrast between this story and how it begins and ends could not be any more stark. I said earlier that this story is in the middle of two other stories – a sandwich. Well we see this ending with Judas in verse 10 & 11, ‘Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them. <sup>11</sup> They were delighted to hear this and promised to give him money. So he watched for an opportunity to hand him over’.

Judas has spent the last 3 years as a disciple of Christ, and for whatever reason he has become disenchanted with it all. And then in Matthew’s Gospel, Judas asks the Sanhedrin what they are willing to pay him. It says that they weigh out 30 pieces of silver. To us we probably don’t truly get the relevance of this, but to a Jew hearing this it would have meant so much more. Let’s look for a moment at Exodus 21 where God is giving the Law to Moses. He talks about problems that occur between people. Listen to what is instructed when incidents happen on your property. Verse 32, ‘If [an owner’s] bull gores a male or female slave, the owner must pay thirty shekels of silver to the master of the slave, and the bull is to be stoned to death’. Judas sells Jesus for the price of a dead slave. Can you see the contempt of him, that he would value Jesus so low and so insignificant. In today’s money that would be the equivalent of maybe £2,000. That’s what Jesus was worth.

Judas sold out Christ for a month’s wage. What a contrast between him and the woman. The woman is willing to burst open a precious jar of oil; the equivalent of a year’s salary - probably £30,000 in today’s money, in order to anoint Jesus with blessing. And here is Judas who is willing to see himself content for a month’s wage, who wants to know what’s in it for him.

Can you see what Mark is trying to get us to think about? It's all about worship. The woman in the room is ascribing worship to Christ and Judas is doing the opposite. And so as I conclude it would be normal for me to give you some actions to take away to do. But today's message is a not a go and do message. It's not about you thinking about how you are going from here to consider what way you are going to use your salary different, or your time for others, or your talents more for the church. There is something deeper going on I think this morning. There's a root issue about who Jesus is that makes the woman respond the way she does. Jesus is the woman's treasure, he is her everything. And because of that, because she fully understands what she has been saved from, what she would have been without Christ, everything is peripheral. She's willing to give up everything for Jesus. Whereas Judas who is so caught up in his own self just needs the money. It is so pitiful. But the question that I ask myself this morning is this, what character would I be in this story?

I don't think I would be Judas, I don't think I would sell Jesus for a month's salary. But as much as I would want to have the attitude of the woman willing to sacrifice everything for Jesus, I'm guessing I might be a disciple in the room whose a bit indifferent. And I would watch from a distance, probably not willing to sell everything for the sake of Christ. And I wonder if someone looked at a snapshot of my life, would they see someone who is so affected by Christ, whose life has been completely changed, that nothing else matters even as far as the priority of my own family or my future security. Or would they see someone who is still caught up in the things in my own life, all the stuff that consumes me?

So who would you be in the story and how would you respond? As we worship again, I want you to think about this. There's nothing to go and do. The question for us all this morning is this - How much is Jesus truly worth to you? At a heart level issue, does Jesus own you, does he have your complete attention, is everything else peripheral? Or is Jesus on the outside looking in wanting to be the most important thing in your life as he was with the woman.

Let us pray.

Thank you Lord to see your son through the eyes of this woman. Would you teach us what it means to love you like that, not through actions, not through religious practice, but at a heart level. Would you teach us what it means to love you in every aspect of our lives. Forgive us for the areas of our lives that distract us and steal our affections from the most important thing which is meant to be you. May we as followers set our eyes on you Lord. Would you in this journey towards Easter be clear where our focus and attention is fixed on. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.