

## More than Marking Time

Anointing and Betraying

Mark 14:1-11

<sup>1</sup> Now the Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread were only two days away...

**When?** Wednesday of Holy Week

Two days before the Passover

<sup>3</sup> While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of Simon the Leper

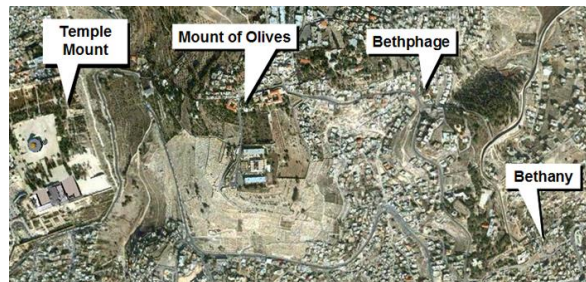
**Where?**

The Dead Sea Scrolls do confirm that a leper colony did live on the outskirts of Bethany at this time. [11Q Temple 46:16-18]

Simon was probably a leper healed by Jesus.

This was the slum on the outskirts of Jerusalem

“Reclining at the table” = eating!



<sup>1</sup> ... the chief priests and the teachers of the law were scheming to arrest Jesus secretly and kill him. <sup>2</sup> ‘But not during the festival,’ they said, ‘or the people may riot.’



Mark inserts the story of the woman and the perfume in to a sandwich between the chief priests and teachers of the law plotting to kill Jesus.

A story which has been brewing since chapter 2, yet still they are not quite ready to commit to action, their plotting, but being held back because the fear Jesus’s popularity and that the crowds gathered for the Passover may give them trouble.

Mark inserts the story of the woman with the alabaster jar of perfume between this and the story of Judas’s betrayal.

<sup>10</sup> 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.

In Mark’s gospel this appears to be the moment that Judas decides to betray Jesus – why?

The traditional answer is greed – and this story plays to that idea – that Judas was, in part, prompted by that her (and the other disciples see as a) waste of money, in the form of the expensive perfume.

But I think that's too simplistic – Judas was a Zealot, he wanted the Jews to rise up and fight the Romans, expel them by force.

Maybe he's disappointed that Jesus hasn't done the things he wanted, worked to his agenda. Or maybe he thinks he can force Jesus hand...

Either way, he goes away at the end of this story looking for a way to hand Jesus over...

Aside: the men don't come out very well in today's story; it is the woman whose action is praised by Jesus while the men are criticised and fail miserably!



<sup>3</sup> While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head.



There is a story of a woman anointing Jesus with Perfume in all four of the Gospels (a rarity).

In Mark and Matthew she pours it over the head of Jesus  
In Luke and John his feet

Are these the same story? I believe so – Yes.

If yes then it points to my belief that the Gospel writers are acting as editors, recounting the stories of Jesus with a particular goal in mind.

It indicates the presence of a human in the writing of the story of Jesus – something I am very happy with.

If no (as some argue) then these are two remarkably similar events.

Worth pondering in your small groups this week?

Alabaster Jar of very expensive perfume...  
Alabaster, white stone... pure nard...

Hindu cultures Nard is used as medicine for healing.  
Islamic traditions relate that nard was the fruit eaten by Adam that God had forbidden him to consume.  
Nard was and still is used in burial preparation of bodies in Greek and Middle Eastern cultures.  
In medieval Europe, nard was used to flavour food, especially the sweet and spicy wine drink called Hypocras.



Nard was considered an absolute luxury in ancient Egypt and was further developed as the perfume by the Romans.

Nard is mentioned numerous times in the Old Testament, and is one of 11 herbs for the Incense of the Holy Temple.

Often associated with love, it is mentioned twice in the Song of Solomon, 1:12 and 4:13.

Related to lavender, it can be very difficult to harvest. The underground stems can be crushed to make a fragrant powder, or steam distilled into a thick, amber-coloured oil.



*The Clive Christian No 1 Perfume Imperial Majesty Edition costs \$215,000 and was created by famed perfumer Roja Dove. It is 500 ml and comes in a rare Baccarat crystal bottle engraved with the purchaser's name. = £140,000*

Several theories about the perfume.

Some argue it would have been too expensive for any woman to own so must have been a gift from a whole community...

Others that this was the tools of her trade as a prostitute, used to allure men.

Who knows, but the point is that it was extravagant...

<sup>4</sup> Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, 'Why this waste of perfume?' <sup>5</sup> It could have been sold for more than a year's wages and the money given to the poor.' And they rebuked her harshly.

My problem at the beginning of this week was that I agreed with the disciples – it does sound like a waste of money to me!

Ok technically, I think perfume is a waste of money! So spending a year's wages on a bottle you'd expect it to last a life time, not be smashed and poured away in one go!



<sup>6</sup> 'Leave her alone,' said Jesus. 'Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. <sup>7</sup> The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me.



No says Jesus, this not a waste, the poor you will always have, but you will not have me.

Some use this as an excuse not to help the poor, I don't think that is way Jesus is saying, in fact quite the opposite.

I think there is an implicit assumption that his followers will

help the poor, then and now.

But Jesus says she has done a 'beautiful thing' – 'what she could'

She has done a beautiful thing to me....<sup>8</sup> She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial.

<sup>9</sup> Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.'



Do we value beautiful things, do we value beauty?

I don't mean do we value beautiful people over others as the media does that because that stinks.

I mean beauty in our worship.

When God created the world he said it was good (beautiful).

Beauty is an attribute of God, and beauty is part of what it means to be made in God's image.

Beauty is sometime seen as a waste of time, because it rarely adds to the financial bottom line.

Look at contemporary architecture, need to cut costs, make the building simple, drop the extra things that make for a beautiful building.

But of course the beauty of the woman's offering is in the generosity of her action and the meaning Jesus understands in it – anointing.



### **Anointing**

Amongst other things Nard was often used to anoint dead bodies to prepare them for burial.

Did the woman know this was what she was doing? Probably not – but Jesus certainly understand her action this way as he knows what is before him.

In three days' time, Jesus would be stripped naked, flogged and hung on a cross.

And as he hangs there in agony, stripped to his under garments, what will remain? The scent of this perfume

A whole bottle poured into the hair wouldn't wash out in three days. This action, this act of beauty, this anointing would go with him all the way to the cross.

Waste of money? No longer...

Grace has its roots in the word gratuitous, undeserved; unmerited; lavished...

Yet we can so easily miss the scandal...

Jesus is in the home of a leper in down town...

While reclining to eat a meal and woman (possibly off ill repute or a prostitute) is pouring a whole bottle of expensive perfume over his head...



If that were me, you'd be looking to have me dismissed for 'conduct unbecoming...' Of course I don't mean to suggest that Jesus sinned or that there is any sin implied here, but never the less, it is mighty uncomfortable!

This is a moment of intimacy, love, of gratitude, of passion...

If this is Mary, then she is lavishing her all on Jesus, the man who saved her...

### **So how are we to respond?**

Do we want to be like the disciples who fail to see the beauty of the moment?

How many times do we miss the beautiful and passionate because we're busy finding 'good moral and upright' reasons to stop it from happening...

*'The perfume could have been sold and the money given to missions...'*

Arms folded, sitting on the side lines, tutting... It's just not right, he's a rabbi she's a prostitute, what is he doing allowing her to do this?

So often when we do that, we miss the act of grace, of lavish giving, of beauty, of risk.

Uncomfortable? Undoubtedly, but Jesus is never safe, and neither should be following him...

Following Jesus should be a life (in all its fullness) full of grace, full of beauty, passion, generosity, fully lived and poured out as an act of worship... with a smell that lingers...

### **Please choose 5 questions from the list below for your small groups this week**

1. Why do you think Judas decided to betray Jesus, is it possible to feel any sympathy for him?
2. Head or Feet? Anointing at the beginning or end of Jesus ministry? The detail is slightly different in each of the four gospel accounts of this story. How do you account for this?

3. Are you happy with the (I believe correct) idea that the bible is the product of human hands written in response to the writers' experience of the action of God (under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit) and therefore it can be studied as both a historical and literary document, with the agenda and voice of the human writers coming through? What implications does this have?
4. Waste of money?
5. Define beauty? Is it ever a waste of time?
6. Are you uncomfortable with Jesus hanging out in the slums and allowing a woman (potentially a prostitute) to express her love in this way?
7. Do you agree that sometimes we are so conservative in our faith (often for good reasons) and so scared of risk or scandal that we can occasionally miss the beauty, passion and gratuity of life? Shouldn't following Jesus be a life lived to the full, full of passion, risk and sometimes the potential for scandal?
8. The woman gave 'what she could' what can you give Jesus in worship?