

Mark 14:1-12

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[0 : 00] I'd like you now to open your Bibles at page 1020, which is Mark chapter 14, and we'll take as a starting point for our meditation this evening on the anointing of Jesus at Bethany, his words concerning that anointing.

Verse 6, Leave her alone, said Jesus. Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. She has done a beautiful thing to me.

This is one of the most beautiful incidents recorded in the Gospel of love and affection and devotion of a disciple to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Here we have an example of the devotion of Mary, who is identified only in John's account of this moving incident.

And it is an incident which I think it is appropriate for us to consider and to think about as we prepare to celebrate the Lord's Supper.

[1 : 23] It is interesting that this event took place during a meal, and as the Lord's Supper was originally instituted as part of the Passover meal.

It has become over the centuries a symbolic meal, but in the first instance it was part of a real meal. And we see the connection between it and this dinner which was given in the honour of Jesus.

Secondly, we see Jesus linking the action of Mary as a symbolising or signifying in some way his death.

He says that it was intended that she should save as perfume for the day of my burial in John's account. And perfume was normally associated with festivity, but it was often used in burials.

And Jesus links this action of Mary with his own burial, which Mary's act unwittingly anticipates. And thirdly, we see a link between this incident and the Lord's Supper, when Jesus says that whatever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her.

[2 : 47] A reminder that when the Lord's Supper is celebrated, that is a witness to the world. We proclaim the Lord's death until he come.

And so we see here a link. This was a sign on the part of Jesus, of his confidence concerning the purpose of his mission, that that mission would be fulfilled.

He knew the cross loomed close ahead. That he never believed that his death would be the end. He believed that the good news would go on throughout the world because of his resurrection.

And that with the good news would go this story of the devotion of Mary and love of Mary. So we have here an act of devotion that demonstrates the love of Mary for Jesus.

And there's a sense in which that ought to be our response as we celebrate the Lord's Supper.

[3 : 57] We come to express our love and devotion to him. It's not simply a question of having faith. Faith is, of course, crucial.

That to participate in the Lord's Supper, truly, we need not only faith, but we also need love. But that love which we do not of ourselves possess is a love which has been poured out into the hearts of God's people.

So that we are enabled to love him with the love with which he has loved us. And so this focus on love here is one which I believe helps us to prepare to celebrate the death and to remember the death of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This do, he said, to help you to remember me. We do this out of love for him. So what does Mary tell us in her action about her love, about love for Jesus?

What can we learn from her love for him that will enhance our love for him? Well, I think there are several things. The first is that love is impetuous or spontaneous.

[5 : 18] She used pure nard, we're told. Nard is the name both of a plant and of the fragrant oil that it yields. What happened here was unusual because she poured the oil on Jesus' feet.

Normally, when a person was anointed, they were anointed on the head. The second unusual thing was that she wiped his feet with her hair.

And in the culture of the time, a woman would not publicly unbind her hair. But we see here a spontaneous, if you like, impetuous act.

She didn't count the mandatory cost nor the social consequences. We see love here. Love is not something that operates the way a computer operates.

It doesn't operate in a cold, rational, logical basis. It responds spontaneously to a person.

[6 : 32] And this is what Mary's love did on this occasion. Whether she planned this in advance or not, we do not know.

But we know that she did it in love. She was not afraid of the consequences. She was not afraid of doing things that were not done. If what she did was to express her love and devotion for her Lord and Saviour.

And it's so easy for us sometimes to find ourselves in a straitjacket. And because this straitjacket is so rigid that we find it difficult to be spontaneous in our religious affections.

And I think Mary is challenging us to feel free to express our love and our devotion to Jesus. And to do that not within some form of rigidity, but to do it freely and to express that love to Him.

We will have an opportunity, God willing, a week today to express our love to Jesus. But Mary tells us also that love is extravagant.

[7 : 52] It's not just spontaneous, it's extravagant. She had an alabaster jar which she broke and used the ointment which came out of it.

We read a man from the scholars that Jewish women of the time were very fond of perfume. And they frequently carried a little alabaster jar of perfume around their necks.

They also tell us that this sealed flask had a long neck. And that the way you got into the flask and got the perfume out was to break the neck. And these flasks were of a certain size so that they contained sufficient oil for one application.

Now this was a luxury item. It wasn't, you know, oil bought off the bottom shelf. It was luxury. It was alabaster, which was considered to be a luxury item, as I've said.

It was worth, Mark tells us, more than 300 denarii. Now the denarii was the coin.

[9 : 10] One denarius was in fact a working man's wage. So if we would translate that into our situation today in terms of the minimum hourly wage of, I think it's five pounds, that would mean that this gift that she broke under her neck in today's terms would be worth twelve thousand pounds.

Now this was a costly act on our behalf. It would be costly for any of us to give a gift to anyone worth twelve thousand pounds.

And the denarii is, I think, here demonstrating that love is extravagant. It's interesting that her action is compared and contrasted with the action of Judas, who immediately, because of this incident, went to the authorities and made an arrangement to betray Jesus.

And we read in one of the Gospels that he asked, How much will you give me? And they said, Thirty pieces of silver. Now thirty pieces of silver, thirty silver coins, come to a hundred and twenty denarii, which is not even half the value of the perfume.

So here you have a contrast. Jesus was sold for less than half the value of the perfume that Mary expended on Jesus.

[10 : 49] So love does not calculate the cost. Again we come back to the fact that we live in a society where money is the measure of most things.

But as far as Mary is concerned, it was love that was more important. She didn't calculate the cost. This may have been the most precious thing that she had.

And she poured it on Jesus' feet as an anointing for his burial. So love doesn't calculate the cost.

It doesn't think in terms of how little we can decently give and get away with it. But she thinks in terms of how much we can give.

And that surely is a challenge to us, is it not? We tend often to operate on the basis of minimal love. Mary here is operating on the basis of maximal love.

[11 : 50] And she's challenging us not to count the cost. Not when I speak of cost, I don't necessarily mean in monetary terms, but in all other ways, in terms of our time, in terms of our energy, in terms of our reputation, and so on.

Let us not count the cost when we come to serve and to honour the Lord Jesus Christ. We think of his love for us, which was so magnificent, which was so, it was infinite cost.

We simply cannot put a price on the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a priceless salvation that he has purchased for us.

And he invites us in response to manifest our love to him in a way which also is extravagant. Although Mary's accent challenges us in a whole range of ways, it also challenges us in financial terms as well to ask ourselves in our giving to the church, which is really giving to Jesus, are we as generous as love for him would have it to be?

Are we extravagant in that sense? Not reckless, but willing to sacrifice. Someone has said that when the gospel turns the world upside down, the money falls out of the people's pockets.

[13 : 31] And certainly it is when we love the Lord Jesus Christ and come to a fresh awareness, a new awareness of his great love for us, that often it is in these moments that the people of God can indeed be generous in their giving to the body of Christ.

So love is spontaneous. Love is extravagant. But I think we also see here that love is opportunist in the best sense of the term.

Judas and probably some of the others thought that this money should have been given to the poor. The perfume should have been sold and the money given to the poor. This event took place on the eve of the Passover and it was the custom of the time that gifts would be given to the poor on the evening of the Passover.

And so Judas thought that this money should be given to the poor. On the other hand, Jesus accepts the gift.

Jesus was obviously concerned about the poor and Jesus has a great deal of teaching in the ministry of Jesus about the priority of the poor and the need to have a bias towards the poor.

[14 : 52] But at the same time, he emphasizes here the uniqueness of the opportunity that Mary had when he says, you will not always have me.

What Jesus is in fact saying here is that you can help the poor at any time. But this was the one occasion, the one week in the whole of human history when his body could be anointed.

And Mary chose that week. She grasped the opportunity because that opportunity came that week and it would not come again. She grasped it.

And I think there's a lesson here for us, is there not? As we were saying this morning, to distinguish between time in terms of chronos and times in terms of kairos.

Time in terms of hours and minutes and time in terms of opportunity. We are called to grasp opportunities for Jesus and to see opportunities.

[15 : 59] We tend to have a mentality so often in the church of seeing problems rather than opportunities. We tend to see the obstacles rather than the stepping stones.

And Mary is challenging us to be opportunist in the best sense of the term. To take advantage of opportunities that come and to see even obstacles as opportunities.

An incident or an issue which some people see as an obstacle can for others be an opportunity. I think Jesus is challenging us through commending Mary's action here to seize opportunities for the gospel and not to allow these opportunities to pass.

If we hesitate, sometimes we will never have that opportunity again. I remember some years ago having a talk with Bishop Diniz Sengolani who is an Anglican bishop of Mozambique.

I think he's the only Anglican bishop in the whole country of Mozambique. And he told me how he was traveling through Mozambique during the Civil War which raged there a number of years ago.

[17 : 18] And I'm sure some of us can remember that time 10, 15 years ago when the Runami guerrilla movement was very active in the country. And there were a lot of attempts by the government to come to a truce with the rebels but they all failed.

Now Diniz Sengolani told me that he was traveling there by plane as a big country and he went to a town and the plane couldn't take off again or the plane that was supposed to take him didn't arrive.

He was stranded there. And he found himself having to go back into the town from the airport to the hotel. And he sat in the foyer of this hotel. And when he was there he discovered that the government and the rebels were having a meeting in that hotel.

And he began to pray for them. And the meeting broke up. This attempt to bring a truce broke up in failure.

And the rebel leader was leaving the hotel and Diniz Sengolani told me he said I knew I had two minutes if I was going to witness to that man. I had two minutes.

[18 : 33] And he was meditating on the sand and he said if God's word is good enough for David it's good enough for Diniz. And he went out and he stopped the leader and he said blessed are the peacemakers.

And the leader stopped and he said who said that? He said Jesus said it. And the leader turned to him and he said why didn't you tell me that before? He turned around went back into the conference room and a truce was negotiated.

There we have an example of the word of Jesus literally changing the history and indeed the destiny of a country. But it was because one Christian was prepared to grasp that opportunity in two minutes.

And he went forward greatly fearing that God blessed him and God used him. And he did that because of his love and devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ whom he served.

And I think that is a challenge to us to grasp opportunities. So often if we you know consider them they've gone.

[19 : 47] We need sometimes to grasp them when they come because if we take when we spend some time thinking about them when we come back these opportunities have passed they've gone.

so love is opportunist. And the Lord's Supper is a challenge to us to express our love to the Lord Jesus Christ in service not simply by coming to the table of the Lord but by leaving the table the Lord's table to be his witnesses equipped with a new sense of his love.

So the love with which he has loved us and the love with which we've sought and that which we've sought to use to respond to him is a love which he wants to carry us to us to carry out into the world to demonstrate that love to other people.

He wants us to show them his love and to show it first of all by telling the good news of the Lord Jesus Christ. There are many people in Aberdeen there are many people in Scotland there are many people in Western Europe many people in the world who don't know the story of the Lord Jesus Christ of his life and of his death and of his resurrection and of his ascension.

We need to tell the story. We need to share the good news and the good news is not simply a series of theological facts important as these are but the good news is the basis of these facts which is the story and I believe that increasingly God is calling us to share the story to share the good news of the Lord Jesus Christ just to tell the story to retell the story or parts of the story as we have it in the Bible and in this way to become vehicles of the word of God to others and we're challenged to do that because we read in 1 Corinthians chapter 11 that when we celebrate the Lord's Supper we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

[21 : 51] So what we're doing symbolically at the Lord's table we are in fact by implication committing ourselves to do it outside to do it wherever our lot may be cast and as opportunity arises to witness to him and to proclaim his death his love and his mercy.

Remember some years ago during a visit to New Zealand speaking in an Anglican church in the city of Christchurch in the south island of New Zealand and it was in the winter it was very cold it was weather like we're having now and I noticed there was a large car park outside the church and there was a nice big notice board as we went in it was only when we were going out and taken away from the meeting or the conference that was held in the church that I noticed that there were two notices there was a notice on the outside which said the name of the church and the hours of services and who the vicar was and so on but there was another notice on the inside and you didn't see that notice until you were going out and the notice on the inside said worship has ended the service is about to begin and I think that's absolutely true and each time we leave the church the services each time we leave a service of worship the service is beginning we carry the word of God out with us in some of the Dutch churches there's a symbolic act at the end of each service not only is the Bible carried into the church by an elder or by what we would call the beetle it is also carried out carried out before the congregation out the front door of the church as a symbol that the message that is being heard will be carried by the congregation out into the world so that we carry the word of God the good news of Jesus Christ with us we become carriers we become people who communicate the word of God and take it out into the world outside the church now such service is a service of humility the word that Jesus uses for servant in the New Testament is the word which was used commonly of table waiters and when he said at the Lord's table

I am among you as those who serve he is there as the waiter and of course the word diakonos from which we get the word deacon means more than a table waiter it was wider than that and we are called to serve but it is not it is it is it is humble service it is it is it is service of those who are willing to spend and to be spent love is issues in humility not in self exaltation Mary's act showed her humility it was a servant's work to attend to the feet of a visitor people in the culture of the time wore sandals the roads were dusty and if someone came to your home one of the things you would do if you had a servant you would ask that servant to wash that person's feet they would take off their sandals and the servant would wash their feet you remember how

Jesus washed his own disciples feet now Peter objected he said that's not servant's work Lord and the Lord said I'm among you as one who serves and he who is our master invites us to follow him in this lifestyle of service so that when we leave the Lord's table we do so not simply to carry his word important as that is and crucial as that is but also to carry his love and to demonstrate that love in action towards those who are in need to provide that service for those who are those who require it and so as we leave every as we leave every service of worship and especially as we leave the Lord's table we ought to be asking ourselves how can I repay the Lord or express to the Lord my love in service for others what can I do for him what action can I do that would replicate

Mary's action on this occasion now we read that such was the measure of the anointing that the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume we read that in John's gospel the fragrance of Mary's work Mary's devotion went far beyond the house of Simon and Bethany the fragrance of Mary's service has gone into all the world as Jesus said it would we see here how the love of Mary has been a challenge to the people of God throughout many generations the early church fathers as they commented on this passage have seen a double meaning in the fragrance of the perfume they've taken it to mean that the whole church was filled with the sweet memory of Mary's devotion a lovely deed becomes the possession of the whole world and adds to the beauty of life in general something which time can never take away and so

[28 : 13] Jesus is here speaking of the beauty of what Mary did she has done a beautiful thing for me it's interesting this word that translates the Aramaic phrase that Jesus would have used when he says she has done a beautiful thing for me the word does not simply mean good it includes that of course it wasn't just goodness it was something beautiful it wasn't just a moral act it was an aesthetic act it was something that was beautiful aesthetic as well as ethical it was of course morally good it was morally outstanding but it was also beautiful and I think when we speak about the good works that God calls us to do we need to realize that these works are not simply good in the sense of being morally good but he asks us to do things that are beautiful that are attractive that will demonstrate his love to others that will demonstrate not simply the ten commandments crucial as these are but to even more than that demonstrate the love of God that love which he has demonstrated to us

Paul writing to the Corinthians speaks of the love of Christ as the great motivation of his life he said that he judged that if one man died for all then all for whom he died should live for him the love of Christ he said constrains me the love of Christ urges me on that was Paul's motivation he had the love of Christ in his heart and it was that that that that that that that was the driving force in his life and that was why he wanted to take the gospel into the whole world as he knew it that was his ambition to go in right right across the length of the Mediterranean for the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ he told the Corinthians the love of Christ constrains me the love of Christ urges me on I wonder as we come to the close of our service this evening we might ask ourselves what is it that motivates us what is it that makes us tick what is it that makes us do things is it the love of

Christ that's the challenge that Mary is bringing to you and to me tonight are we being motivated by the love of Christ is the love of Christ constraining us is it challenging us in our what we say and what we do and what we are to be the messengers of the love of God that love which was demonstrated so spectacularly in Calvary is a love which has been poured out into our hearts not that we might keep it not simply that we might be consumers of it but that we might share it with others and so as we anticipate thanking the Lord for his love for us and coming to express our love to him let us consider how we might be able to demonstrate that love to others so that the love which was poured out at Calvary the love which has been placed in our hearts by the

Holy Spirit may also be the love that constrains us to do what is good and what is beautiful for God and for his kingdom gonna go to take that time no