

SERMON – 6/4/25

John 12:1-8

Jesus said, 'Leave her alone! Let her keep what she has for the day of my burial. You will always have poor people with you but you will not always have me.' (John 12:7-8)

Easter is fast approaching. Next Sunday is Palm Sunday, and then Holy Week, with its many opportunities for worship and reflection, which I commend to you, will take us to the very heart of the Gospel of redemption, the death and burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ in whom is our hope and our joy. Over the next couple of weeks we will be reflecting on the events that unfolded all those years ago but which continue to have a unique significance even today and I hope that in the process we will all be able to grasp with a firmer faith what these events have to do with you and me.

We read this morning the very start of the account in John's Gospel of the last week of Jesus' life on earth, what is known as His Passion. 'Six days before the Passover,' our passage began. The story will be familiar to many of you – a dinner is being given in Jesus' honour and while those who have gathered are reclining at the table a woman breaks a jar of expensive perfume and pours it on His feet, wiping it off with her hair. Voices are raised in objection to the waste of perfume, which could have been sold to raise funds for the poor, but Jesus defends her actions, pointing out the connection between the anointing with perfumed oil and the day of His burial, which *He* knew (if no-one else did) was less than a week away, saying 'You will always have poor people with you, but you will not always have me.'

This same story is recounted in slightly different forms by all the other three Gospel writers. Like John, Matthew and Mark place this story at the beginning of the Passion narrative; Luke, however, records it (or a similar incident) much earlier in his Gospel and includes the story of Jesus comparing the actions of the woman who pours the perfume with Simon the Pharisee at whose house he says the episode takes place, but who has failed to act as a proper host to his guests. In Luke's account, Jesus tells the parable of the unforgiving servant: 'Two men owed money to a certain money lender. One owed him 500 denarii and the other

50. Neither of them had the money to pay him back so he cancelled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?’ Referring to the woman who has poured the perfume, Jesus says to the Pharisee, her many sins have been forgiven because she has loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.’

The emphasis in Mark’s account is on the indignation of some of those present that such a lot of perfume had been wasted. The identity of those who complained is not divulged in Mark, while in Matthew it is said to be ‘the disciples.’ John for his part pins the blame on Judas Iscariot alone. Different witnesses to the events will always remember things slightly differently and far from making these contradictory accounts, the variation between the Gospels in this case actually authenticates the record – these are real-life memories, not manufactured stories.

John’s is actually the fullest of the accounts, not only describing the pouring of the perfume, but naming the woman who poured it as Mary the brother of Lazarus and alluding to (but not telling) another story that Luke recounts – the one where Martha is running around making sure everyone has food and getting hot under the collar about the fact that her sister Mary is sitting at Jesus’ feet listening to Him teach. John also makes the connexion with the raising of Lazarus from the dead, which of course he has recounted only in the previous chapter. John also fills out some of the reasons behind the objections that Judas makes to the wasting of the perfume – he didn’t care about the poor but was a thief, helping himself to the money that had been entrusted to him on behalf of Jesus and the Twelve. The scene is set for Judas’ betrayal of Jesus.

It’s fascinating (and important for us all as students of the Word of God) to make comparisons between the different Gospel accounts, but what we also need to do is to make connexions between what is written here and what God is saying to us today both as individuals and as a congregation – that is the purpose of Bible study in general and preaching in particular. What, then, are we to take from this passage today? Listen for God’s living Word to you this morning.

First of all, we have noted Mary's act of devotion in pouring the perfume on Jesus' feet and wiping them with her hair, but John describes the result of that with an striking phrase – 'The sweet smell of the perfume filled the house.' At one level, it is not surprising – if you buy expensive perfume, then you expect it to go a long way. If you or I bought perfume and the whole bottle was spilt but you could only smell it in the immediate area of the spill we would rightly feel cheated. We would expect to be able to smell it at a distance. So why does John mention the fact here? I suppose he describes the perfume wafting throughout the house to emphasise just how much perfume had been poured, but it seems to me that it is also a call to us to take note of what the apostle Paul will later say to the Corinthians about God spreading through *us* the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ.

Mary's act of costly devotion would have been noted not only by those who were present on that occasion but by others over the succeeding days. People would come into the house, notice the scent and ask what it was. Does *our* devotion to Christ leave such a smell behind us? Do people notice something different about our actions, about our words, about our lives? Is the household of God, this family of God's people, filled with the fragrance of the service of Christ? It is true that Paul says the smell of the knowledge of Christ will seem to some like the fragrance of life while to others it will seem like the stench of death, but that's more to do with *their* reactions to it that to what we are giving out. The point is, is there any fragrance of Christ about us at all? Our worship can be as vibrant and as lavish and as heart-felt as can be but if it does not spill over into our lives then perhaps it is nothing more than cheap imitation scent that evaporates in an instant.

Secondly, there is the controversy about the cost of the perfume. 'Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor?' And Jesus replies, 'You will always have poor people among you but you will not always have me.' Was it a waste? Should it have been sold to raise money for the poor? Should we attempt to draw any lessons from it for our own time, or were Jesus' words only relevant for the context in which He Himself was present? People of faith are not different from anyone else in having different priorities when it comes to the way we think money should be

spent and resources deployed. Jesus' words have been used by some to justify expenditure on such things as church buildings and works of art offered in devotion to Christ even while round about people are living in terrible poverty and suffering. To that extent, I don't think we can simply take this saying of Jesus and apply it in any context. Those words 'You will always have poor people among you' can never be an excuse for inaction when it comes to the relief of poverty. Equally, these sayings have been recorded for us and are obviously meant to make us think about the relative importance in our lives of what you might call the spiritual and the material.

In reality, true devotion to Christ will always work itself out in practical action for the benefit of those who are in most need around about us – not only those who are materially poor, but those who are lacking in companionship, those who suffer from poor health, those who have had a poor education, those who have never heard the Good News of Jesus. Pointing to the hungry and thirsty, to the stranger, to the naked and the sick and the imprisoned, Jesus said, 'Whatever you did for the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me' and 'Whatever you failed to do for these brothers and sisters of mine, you failed to do for me.' It's interesting to note that many charities particularly target churches and people of faith because they know that by and large some of the most generous givers are to be found amongst those who are giving themselves in faithful and sometimes lavish devotion to God. That, in fact, is one of the ways in which the aroma of Christ is most noticeable in the lives of Christian believers.

But thirdly, and finally in our reading, Jesus makes the connexion between Mary's pouring of the perfume on Him at the dinner party and the fact that there would be no time to anoint His body for burial according to Jewish custom. The anointing of Jesus' body was actually prevented by two completely different happenings after His death, both of which were entirely out of the control of Mary and the other women who stuck by Jesus as He was crucified and who were first on the scene on Easter morning. In the first place, the women were prevented from accompanying the burial party to the tomb by the legal restrictions placed by the Roman

authorities and by the Sabbath observance of the Jewish authorities. But when they returned on the third day, the Sabbath over, they were also stymied in their attempts to anoint the body by the fact that the body was gone, and that in fact Jesus had been raised from death.

Mary had seized the moment a week earlier, probably completely unaware of the fact that just a few days later she would not have the opportunity. And perhaps that is the message with which we should close our reflection on the Gospel this morning and embark on our living out of the Gospel in the coming week. Let me encourage you to seize the moment. Seize the moment in worship – let yourself go in lavish devotion to Jesus Christ. Sing your heart out, yield your life to Him, care nothing of what others may think of you, just worship the King. Let me encourage you to seize the moment in giving to the poor – give generously as the Lord has prospered you. There is enough food to go round in this world *if* we all share; there is a real possibility of ending poverty *if* world leaders are persuaded that this is something people like us really care about. And let me encourage you to seize the moment in telling others the Good News about Jesus Christ. The decline of the church is not inevitable. If each one of us were to tell just one other person the story and the significance of Christ's death and resurrection over this Easter period and invite that person to share in the new life that Jesus gives what blessing there would be to many.

Prayer

I will offer up my life in spirit and truth pouring out the oil of love as my worship to you. In surrender I must give my every part; Lord, receive the sacrifice of a broken heart.

Jesus, what can I give, what can I bring to so faithful a friend, to so loving a king? Saviour, what can be said? What can be sung as a praise of your name, for the things you have done? Oh, my words could not tell, not even in part, of the debt of love that is owed by this thankful heart.

You deserve my every breath, for you've paid the great cost; giving up your life to death, even death on a cross. You took all my shame away, there defeated my sin, opened up the gates of heaven and have beckoned me in.