

Anointed (Mark 14:1-11)

Jesus' last journey (Simon Rea)

Sunday Evening 24 February 2008

Mark 14 1 Kings 1

Like some other kids, 12-year-old Trevor McKinney believed in the goodness of human nature. Like many other kids, he planned to change the world for the better. Unlike most other kids, he succeeded. Does anyone recognise the film I'm talking about? As part of a social studies project, Trevor suggests the concept that every person who benefits from someone else's good deed should "pay it forward," and he starts by letting a homeless man stay in his mum's flat. Trevor's plan is to help Jerry by feeding and housing him so he can "get on his feet." Pay it forward was one of the most memorable films of 2000 and it led to an outbreak of what someone called random acts of kindness and senseless acts of beauty which resurfaced again last year as acts of random kindness ARK - get it? - in Evan Almighty, the reworking of the Noah story. This evening we're going to look at an incident from Mark's gospel which may look at first sight just like one of those random acts of kindness or a senseless act of beauty. The reading describes the anointing of Jesus by a woman at the house of Simon the Leper in Bethany, just outside Jerusalem. The events it describes may seem simple but they challenge us to look at our priorities in unexpected ways. What is more important to us? The price of a flask of perfume or the perfection of a woman's present. What is more important to us? The price of a flask of perfume or the perfection of a woman's present.

But before we focus on that we're going to start by listening to an OT reading which should give us an insight into what the disciples may have been thinking about when they spent that evening at the house of Simon the Leper. This should help us understand the background to our gospel passage. Mike is going to come and read it to us now. [1 Kings` 1:32-40]

So what might the disciples have been thinking about? It might have been something like this: Remember David and Solomon. Now that's what an anointing should be like. That's how an anointing should be: the old generation ceremonially passing on the baton to the new. David, the

king, Nathan his prophet, Zadok the high priest and Benaiah the captain of his bodyguard all there, all part of it in one way or another. Pomp and ceremony. Then the triumphal entry of the king's son on a mule in full view of all the people with shouts of celebration and the sounds of trumpets. That's how an anointing should be. And it was just in time, too. It was just in time to prevent the plot against the new king from taking place. Just in time to prevent the plot against the wisest ever king of Israel. That's how an anointing should be: David, the greatest king passing on power to Solomon the wisest king with the participation of prophets, priests and the people. That's the way things should be thought the disciple. That's the way it should be. It shouldn't be like this, he thought. He shouldn't be like this. It shouldn't be hidden away, not after the way Jesus had ridden into the city to the shouts and cheers of the crowd. It shouldn't be like this, not after the way he and the others had seen Jesus' power, withering the fig tree with a word and winding up the Pharisees and Sadducees with his wisdom. It shouldn't be like this: on the edge of the city, not in the centre, at the home of a leper, not at the mansion of a priest. It shouldn't be like this: with a poor woman not a prophet to do the anointing. At least she would be poor now, after all that perfume must have cost her: over a years wages at a rough guess. A stupid waste of money just when we needed it most. You always need money at Passover time to give to the poor - even if you felt poor yourself. It shouldn't be like this.

It shouldn't have been like that - but it was. All 4 evangelists tell a similar story about Jesus being anointed by a woman (Luke 7:36-50; Matt 26:6-13; Joh 12:1-8) but tonight we're going to focus on what Mark tells us about how things happened. Michael is going to come and read it to us now. You can follow the passage in your pew Bibles on p1020 or close your eyes and try to picture the scene which Mark describes so well: [Mark 14: 1-11]

Bethany was on the edge of Jerusalem and Jesus' host was most probably on the edge of society, too. All we know about him is that he was a leper and that he invited Jesus to his house for a passover eve party just before

Jesus was to die. Perhaps he may have been healed by Jesus earlier in his ministry. We don't know. Unlike the other gospel writers, Mark doesn't tell us the name of the woman who did the anointing, either. He wants us to focus on the events he describes here, not the names of the people present.

So what happens in the reading? As the disciples are reclining around the table, a woman brings out an alabaster jar of expensive perfume. She kneels behind Jesus, breaks the neck of the bottle and pours the perfume all over Jesus feet and over his head. The conversations cease as the smell of the food is overwhelmed by the intoxicating smell of pure nard. The whole house is filled with the powerful fragrance. The disciples go off on one the original word sounds like the snorting of horses and one of them - Judas Iscariot according to John - lets rip at her, "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." (John 12:5). But Jesus won't have any of it. He sticks up for her and tells them to leave her alone because she has done a beautiful thing (the Greek literally means a good work) for him.

Where would we place ourselves in this story? With the rightly indignant disciples? With the extravagant unnamed woman? With Jesus? Or even with Judas? What would our priorities have been? The price of the perfume or the perfection of the present.

Let's start with the perfume itself: What was the perfume that permeated the room that night? Not one of Dior's finest creations or Britney Spear's latest but a scented ointment or perfume imported from the East, possibly from North India or even Tibet in alabaster boxes which in the OT was opened only on special occasions (Song of Sol. 1:12; 4:13, 14). So nard was special and the gospels tell us that it was very expensive, too. John says the anointing of Jesus must have cost the woman about the equivalent of around £20,000 or approximately one year's wages (Mark 14:3-5; John 12:3-5).

Why was it used? The woman used it to anoint Jesus. To anoint literally means to pour or rub oil on a person or thing. This is not a Jamie Oliver 'rub it in to make it

taste better' idea. Anointing in the Bible usually means two things: it sets a person or thing apart as holy and consecrated, and it confers authority on a person who is anointed. In Jewish culture anointing symbolized special recognition for places (Gen 28:18); temple and its furnishings (Ex 40:9-10); garments (Lev 8:30); kings (1 Kings 1:39; 2 Kings 9:6); religious leaders (Ex 28:41; Lev 8:12, priests; 1 Kings 19:16, prophets); heavenly beings (Ezek 28:14); or simply honored guests (Ps 23:5; cf. Lk 7:46; Jn 11:2). Anointing signified consecration for priestly (Ex 30:30; Lev 4:3, 5) and royal service (1 Sam 2:10). Jesus is our high priest and our king, so with hindsight we know that it was right for the woman to anoint him. Anointing symbolizes God's choice and appointment and so it involves divine action in preparation for service (1 Sam 10:1) so anointing brings in the vertical dimension. That's why the title "anointed one" was used for individuals who had been chosen, appointed, consecrated and equipped for office in the OT and especially for royal figures (Ps 2:2; 89:38; 132:10) except for Daniel 9:25-26, where it refers to a future ruler. The Hebrew word for anointed one is Messiah and the Greek translation for Messiah is "Christ" (Christos), is applied to Jesus (Jn 1:41; 4:25; Acts 4:24-27). Christ means 'anointed one' and it's not Jesus' family name. It's a title which symbolises the vertical and horizontal dimensions of his ministry and of our faith: Vertical because it reminds us that Jesus is holy, set apart for God as our great high priest who is praying for us now and horizontal because it reminds us that he is also our king and his words and example should shape our lives here and now.

When the woman anointed Jesus her act was prophetic and full of symbolic significance: Jesus himself tells us that it was to prepare him for death not kingship. There is no earthly way she could have known in advance what her act meant. The reactions of the others show us that they had no idea about it either - even though they had been following Jesus for so long. They really had lost the plot - particularly Judas who went off to betray Jesus after the incident. If he or any of the others had truly understood who Jesus, then they would have eaten their words there and then and not had to eat humble pie

afterwards when they realised what had been going on. Instead, they rebuked the woman harshly because they couldn't let go of a messianic dream built out of worldly wealth and human power. Why did they do that? Their priorities were wrong. They were worried about the price of the perfume. That's why they had those two complaints. First, the fragrant oil is wasted. Second, the expensive oil could have been sold with the proceeds going to the poor. Both criticisms are valid if spiritual truth is limited to rituals not guided by love. In a ritual, a drop is as good as a flaskful because it is the symbol that counts. Logically, the disciples reason that the opportunity to anoint many heads is better than one. A ritualistic mind also fixes upon tradition. On the eve of the Passover, it was the tradition to give alms to the poor. The woman's act makes that practice impossible, so Judas and the other disciples attack her for bad stewardship and a lack of compassion. In a round about way, they also attack Jesus because He accepts her unexpected anointing.

On one level of course, the disciples were right but their behaviour was far from being righteous before God because their motives were wrong, as Judas' actions show. If only the disciples had read the Bible! What does St Paul write in 1 Co 13:1-3

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 3 If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. Paul's words and the woman's act challenge us to look deep into our own hearts to see whether we really are motivated by love like the woman or ritual like the disciples. Do we do things because we love Jesus or do we do things because they're things we've always done?

The price of the perfume. The perfection of the present. I just love what Mark tells us about the way Jesus reacted: His priorities were so different. He loved the perfume. He loved the smell, he loved the love that lay behind it so he rejected the disciples' criticism and matched the woman's gratitude with his words and what he

said to her reminds us that what we do here and now has eternal significance.

What did he say? She has done a beautiful thing to me - 2 things literally she has done me a good work and she did what she could. He did not say. "I am so pleased because she has theologically understood who I am." He said "She has done me a good work." He did not say: "I am so pleased with her because she preached, healed, fed the poor or ran a social outreach project in my name" Don't get me wrong, there is nothing bad about any of those things but that's not what this reading focuses on. Jesus said "She did what she could" And that's the perfection of her present: she did what she could - just like the woman who put her 2 small coins into the temple treasury. [I tell you the truth] wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her." Isn't that amazing? "wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her." Isn't that challenging? Doesn't that challenge you to do what you can for Jesus? Because only you can do what you can, not anyone else. God has called you to things which only you can do and you might be surprised just how beautiful he finds those things. We don't all have the same gifts or abilities, the same resources or the same opportunities to serve Jesus. Don't focus on what you can't do. Focus on what you can do for Jesus.

The Greek words behind good work or beautiful thing conveys a sense of beauty that gives goodness and artistic glow beyond its instrumental value. Debate over the waste of beauty never lets up. Works of fine art are considered wasteful by some people and yet others find their souls cleansed by visiting an art gallery, listening to a symphony, seeing a play, or reading great literature. At Christ Church we are so lucky to be part of a fellowship where creativity is encouraged through the knitters and natterers, through the art group on Tuesday afternoons or the craft group on Thursdays. Jesus puts Himself on the side of artists, musicians, dramatists, and poets when He commends the beauty in the woman's impractical and nonproductive act of devotion.

"She has done me a good work." "She did what she could."

Jesus praises her not because of her knowledge or courage but because she did what she could for him - and what she could do was beautiful. Her act was full of symbolic significance but it wasn't actually that clever, was it? Taking a bottle of perfume and breaking it over his head? Anyone of us here today could do that. Ok so it was OTT. It was extremely expensive and probably completely out of place in that culture at that time. After all women weren't really taken seriously by society then. Jesus acknowledged and appreciated this woman's contribution, even though it may have seemed inappropriate and wasteful. There's a challenge here particularly for those in leadership in whatever way: Do we acknowledge and show our appreciate the contribution of those on the edge of our church community - even if we don't agree with what they are doing or the way they are doing it?

There is just one thing left to be cleared up: When Jesus says that the poor will always be with us he does not mean that we shouldn't do all we can against poverty. Look at the whole of the verse: 7 "The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want." Jesus tells us that we can do what we can but it must be out of love not out of a sense of duty or tradition. But all this was senseless rubbish to Judas. He went at once to the chief priests to find out how much money he could make out of betraying Jesus before it was too late. In the Bible, Judas has no high or patriotic motives; sheer love of money was his downfall, as it has been of many church leaders since, whether in rich or poor countries. That is why Jesus warns so often against the love of money. If Judas could not understand the woman's action, then he would not understand the cross either. We cannot serve God and Money at the same time (Mt. 6:24). Money is an unfaithful mistress but the witness of the Bible is that God is faithful.

What are your priorities? The price of the perfume or the perfection of the present? If you focus on the price of the perfume, you'll end up serving money not God. If you focus on the perfect present, the gift of eternal life that Jesus offers to all who turn to him, then you'll want to be like the woman who did what she could and you'll want to do it out of love not duty. That's why her present was perfect, not because of the price she paid

for the perfume but because of the love she had for her Lord. What are your priorities? The price of the perfume or the perfection of the present?
Let's pray: