

St. Margaret's Uniting Church, Mooroolbark

25th March, 2018 - Palm and Passion Sunday

Rev Arnie Wierenga

READING Mark 14:3-9 *The Anointing at Bethany*

While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. But some were there who said to one another in anger,

'Why was the ointment wasted in this way? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.'

And they scolded her. But Jesus said, 'Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.'

REFLECTION

I wonder how this story of anointing the feet of Jesus sits with you? I wonder if we gloss over it in light of all else that is happening in the passion story? Today we sit with it for a while, mindful that it is one of the few key stories that is in all four gospels.

It was obvious those near Jesus struggled with what was happening. Such extravagance, such waste. Mark's gospel says they 'scold her'. What about the poor, the nameless group protest. After all, she has just poured out a year's wage for a skilled worker. That's probably more than \$100,000, a good house deposit, a luxury car, a big renovation, a few world trips ...

I know I struggle with waste and extravagance, and find it shocking to think that someone would throw away money like this. I want to scold the actor pouring the ointment just as much as any. Surely the criticism is valid. Imagine how many hungry people could have been fed instead? Imagine how many beds for those sleeping rough? Imagine how many work hours for those caring for the poor?

And then Jesus' seeming dismissive response, one that almost deflates our drive to care for the least. 'You will always have the poor with you.'

I think our struggle is because our value system is wrong. At least Jesus is challenging us to consider that gospel values are not what we expect, and dissonance ought cause us to re-evaluate things. I think this challenge comes at the right time – as we ponder the week ahead, the passion of Christ, the kingdom Jesus is about to usher through his death and resurrection. Jesus says simply, *She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. —Mark 14.8*

As challenging as this little incident is, I wonder if the woman is modelling the gospel and values of Jesus to us in ways we can barely see. There are some pointers elsewhere that might help us deepen our understanding of this curious story. Remember that women often play key roles in the good news of Jesus Christ. Perhaps through contrast or design they often inform us more deeply of the transforming love of God. Think about the Samaritan woman caught in the midday sun drawing water because she couldn't even face her own community. Jesus offered her living water, lifted her from the shame of broken relationships, and she was the first evangelist of what God does through Jesus. And this story is even more challenging to Jews, because they were suspicious and felt about Samaritans a bit like many today in Australia feel about Muslims. I think the woman who pours expensive perfume on Jesus proclaims something as important as the Samaritan woman.

But there is something else we will do well to remember about the good news of Jesus Christ. It comes through in all the gospels, but perhaps no more clearly than in the gospel of John. In John's gospel we are

invited to see that the way of God, the love of God, even the glory of God is rich and abundant in love. As John tells it, God is extravagant, abundant and wasteful. This gospel is framed in abundance. Jesus is at a wedding in Cana. The wine runs out. His mother challenges him to restore the feast to what it ought be. And before we know it there is an abundance of wine – the best of wine; and an amount that no village could hope to consume for the life of the party. When seed is scattered, it is with gay abandon. When bread is shared, there is always more left over. The gospel is not about scarcity or storing in case of famine or rainy day.

And so we come to the woman who pours a year's wages over the head of Jesus ... *She comes to the table. She comes from beyond the boundaries. She comes as if she belongs. She comes as if her whole life has been distilled into this one gesture that she offers: lifting, breaking, pouring. She comes with no words, yet with her entire being she proclaims a message both prophetic and priestly as she ministers to Jesus just days before his death.* (Jan Richardson)

Jesus is being prepared for the events unfolding this week. In the week ahead, Jesus embodies all that is extraordinary, abundant, extravagant and merciful as he offers himself towards death in the name of love. If we were tempted to measure it, what the woman does then is nothing compared to what Jesus gives back. But it is not a transaction. In both cases it is an act of love. It is love that cannot be measured, nor contained. It is like the wine or seed or bread – simply ridiculous in measure, abundant, never in danger of running out. I believe this act of love towards Jesus cannot be separated from an act of love for all whom Jesus came for. If we love Jesus, we love all who are hungry, or naked, or sick or in prison. Love Jesus, love all who are poor.

Jan Richardson speaks of pouring ointment as an act of beauty. In response to that she says, *"beauty and justice are not separate from one another but are each part of our response to the Christ who offers himself to us with extravagant love and grace, and who calls us to offer bread and beauty from the same hand."*

There is a beautiful song written by Sydney Carter about this act of love. Rev. Ravanel Weinman shared it this week in one of his reflections:

*Said Judas to Mary now what will you do
With your ointment so rich and so rare?
"I'll pour it all over the feet of the Lord
And I'll wipe it away with my hair," she said,
"I'll wipe it away with my hair "*

*"O Mary O Mary, O think of the poor,
This ointment it could have been sold.
And think of the blankets and think of the bread
You could buy with the silver and gold." he said
"You could buy with the silver and gold."*

*"Tomorrow, tomorrow I'll think of the poor
Tomorrow", she said "not today.
For dearer than all of the poor in the world
Is my love who is going away" she said
"My love who is going away."*

This is the week where our love is going away. In all other stories this is unbearable tragedy. It is a hard story and almost beyond most disciples to stick close with Jesus. Like the twelve we will face temptation, or deny we know him, or simply fall asleep in the garden. But while it is hard to travel this passion journey with Jesus, it is not tragedy. We dare call the day of his death 'Good Friday' because death is not the end. We await to be amazed again like faithful women at an empty tomb.

But right now we invest in Jesus, because our love is going away.

In the spirit of abundant grace that Jesus shows us, what are you willing to waste on Jesus?

Blessing of Balm —Jan Richardson

*When we see
the body of Christ
still broken in this world,*

*may we meet it
with lavish grace
and pour ourselves out
with extravagant love.*