

# Sermon

## 'The Woman with the Alabaster Jar'

3 April 2022



*John 12:1-8*

'Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not

because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

### *Sermon*

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.

With his opening line, the gospel writer John reveals God’s vision for his world. A future of eternal, resurrected life. A future now come in one man, Jesus. A future not yet come to the world.

But there is steak on our plate as we wait. Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah of God, the Paschal Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. And all who share in table fellowship with him now, will share eternal life with him, then. When the kingdom of God comes a final time, at Christ’s return, to make all things new.

Within ancient Israel, the Messiah, when he came, would come in table fellowship in the kingdom of God. Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. In him, the future kingdom of God, has now dawned.

Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

If Lazarus is a symbol of the future, Mary is a symbol of the present life of the Christian discipleship. A life that is given up extravagantly, to the one who gave himself extravagantly to us. Extravagant joy, at the gift of table fellowship with the Lord. In Mary, we have a vision, of Christian discipleship. The same vision of Christian discipleship that we saw last week, in Jesus' Parable of the Prodigal Son. In the joyful extravagance, and the loving embrace, of Father and Son, in table fellowship, of the fatted and slaughtered calf.

Like the Prodigal Son, in the Gospel of Luke, the joy of Mary's coming to Jesus, is contrasted by the misery of those around her. Like the elder son, the Pharisee's false sense of moral self righteousness, leads to their rejection of Christ, and with him, God the Father. While Mary continued kissing Jesus' feet and anointing them with the ointment, Simon the Pharisee said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner." To which Jesus replied 'Simon, I have something to say to you..A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon

answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." Then turning toward the woman, Jesus said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." Then Jesus said to Mary, "Your sins are forgiven." But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" And Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Mary's extravagant love for Jesus, leads to Mary's extravagant act of generosity in favour of Jesus. Seeing more deeply than those around her, to the deeper truth of Jesus' identity, as the Lamb of God come to take away human sins, by his imminent death on the cross, for the sins of the world, she comes to him, with all that she is, and all that she has, to anoint him for his burial. She alone recognises why he has come. As a sacrifice, for human sins.

Acknowledging her own need, Mary came to the light. To the light of Christ. To the searing light of grace, now dawned in this world, in Christ Jesus, the Son of God. Her sins forgiven, all that separated her from the

love of God overcome, she was set free, for sweet fellowship, at the table of the Lord. To sup in the kingdom of God, in the presence of Christ himself.

But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ‘Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?’ Jesus said, ‘Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.’

By judging in favour of Mary here, Jesus gives an answer to the question that faces us all, am I to give myself, my life, my all, all of my worldly possessions, to Jesus Christ, and his ministry, the ministry of the reconciliation of the world, through the death of Christ, that is the ministry of the church, or to the poor? Of course, the Christians is called to be open handed to the poor. That is a good thing. But it is not the ultimate, or the most important thing. And our giving to the poor, must never come before, or at the expense of, our giving to Christ. For the poor do not save. Nor are the poor saved, apart from the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus silences that voice, that whispers into our ear, dreaded condemnation, and one that is aimed at pushing us off our course, as those who by the Spirit are meant to fulfil the great and first commandment, to have no other gods but God. That would seek to veer us off our course, and the greatest and highest honour, of the love of God,

above and before everything else in this world, including the poor. That would keep us from our fulfilment of our divine vocation, that is the way of the cross. The subordination of every other human concern, for the sake of the kingdom of God, in the way of Jesus. The way of life in this world, that leads to eternal life, in the next. The way of the cross.

There must be nothing between us and God. 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.' Such a public rebuke of another man would have been uncommon in those days. It would have been almost unheard of, in the defence of a woman, particularly 'a sinner', 'a woman of the city'. Why is Jesus' judgment so important, so urgent, so profound?

The first clue to our understanding of this is our understanding of the spiritual nature of the character involved. To understand the nature of the spirit that is at work in Judas. A thief, and the one who is about to betray Jesus, in the Garden of Gethsemane we hear that 'Satan entered into him'. But already in chapter 6 of John, Jesus revealed the darkness within Judas Iscariot: 'Did I not choose you, the Twelve, and one of you is a devil?' Behind Judas' seemingly innocent question, there is a darker power involved, that is anything, but innocent. Leading to Jesus' rebuke. Jesus rebukes, not Judas, but the evil one. Jesus sees more clearly and deeply than those around to what is truly going on. To the spiritual battle, that is not just about flesh and blood, but principality and power. The same

principality and power at work in Jesus' exchange with Peter. When Jesus opens up to him, about who he truly is, that he is the suffering Christ, Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, in the name of God 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you. 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.' Then Jesus said, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?' (Matthew 16.21-26).

More deeply than revealing the identity of the evil one, Jesus' judgment reveals his true identity as the Christ, the Messiah of God.

The truth about himself, his person and history, his messianic identity, as the Christ of God.

In Jesus' own day, within Judaism itself, the Jewish messianic hope was centred on a political figure. On merely human things. This was the reason for his rejection and crucifixion. Jesus simply did not meet their expectations. Jesus was a disappointment to them. Not as they hoped for political liberator, but as the Lamb of God, come to take away human sins, Jesus simply failed to meet the political expectations and ambitions of his day. God's messianic plan, and the peoples' messianic plan, were incompatible. Like oil and water. They simply did not mix. Leading to Jesus rejection, and crucifixion. The radicalisation of the messianic

identity of Jesus, under the influence of the zealots of his day, the false hope of the people, was the reason for his rejection by his own people, for the failure of his people to be reconciled to God, in him, and by his crucifixion.

Not as political liberator, but as the Lamb of God, who take away the sins of the world, who has come to reconcile the human race to God, who has come for a world in need of reconciliation to God, Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah of God. And it was in proclamation of his own Messianic identity, against the false teachers, the false teachings, the false prophets, that Jesus judges in favour of Mary in today's Gospel. Within Christianity from the very earliest days, the antichristian spirit of this world was discerned, not in a single figure, but in a number of figures. False teachers, their tempting, but ultimately false teachings, would woo people away from the truth about Christ, from the true Messiah, from the truth about God's redemption. Today, in our own time and place, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they appear in the many alternative, and especially this-worldly doctrines of redemption, to which our modern western secular societies are now exposed.

Because of the problems associated with the traditional term, 'Messiah', the politicisation of the term, its distortion, by his contemporaries, Jesus rejected the title 'Messiah' for himself. Jesus' preferred title for himself was 'Son of Man'. From the Book of Daniel, Jesus fulfilled the apocalyptic vision, the Jewish hope, for a future of justice and peace, at the

hands of the Messiah, when he comes. To bring to nothing, the human kingdoms of the world. To bring to fulfilment, the kingdom of God himself. The imminent kingdom of God, over human kind, and with that, over creation itself. The kingdom that has now come, that has now dawned upon the world, with the resurrection of Jesus. The kingdom that will come, a final time, at his return. When, like a stone falling from heaven, he will crush the merely human political kingdoms of this world, and their false gods. When God makes all things new. In the words of the Apostle, 'For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we await for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.' (Romans 8.19-21).

Meanwhile, while waiting with patience for the kingdom of God, in this world, we will face temptation. The Son of Man, Jesus is the representative of the human race before God. His temptation in the wilderness of this world, is our temptation in this world, as we make our way through the wilderness of this world, into the promised land, of the

future kingdom of God. Having survived the first temptation, the religious temptation, there came the second temptation, the political temptation:

‘Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour, and he said to him, ‘All these I will give you; if you will fall down and worship me.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Away with you, Satan! For it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.’

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The woman with the alabaster jar, is a story of every woman, every man. In a world of fallen humanity, of humanity, though only a creature, desiring for itself the glory of God, the splendour of the Creator God, who as God refuses to share his glory with any one, even with the whole world of his creatures, the woman with the alabaster jar, seeing him for who he is, not as any this worldly, political liberator, but as the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, she comes to him, with all that she is, and all that she has, and she gives everything to him, who on the cross would give everything for her.

The story of the woman with the alabaster jar, is the story of Jesus Christ, the Messiah of God, who died, that the world may live. Who died, that the world may have eternal life. Who died a cold and lonely death, literally, in our place. In place of our sins, and the consequence of those sins, which is death. Who died, abandoned, and alone, proclaiming ‘It is finished!’ As he

gave up his Spirit. And it is finished. The once for all act of God to reconcile this world, the human race, every individual human being, to himself, has now been accomplished. The reign of the evil one over the life of the world is ended. The reign of human sins, has come to an end. And with that, the reign of death.

The once for all act of God, to reconcile this world to himself, is finished. The deed is done. The mighty action of God in history – the reconciliation of the world to God - is won. Though not in a final way, but in an anticipatory way. As a foretaste, a flash forward, as in a movie, of that scene, when, at Christ's return, God will wipe away every tear from the world's eyes. As an anticipation of that day when death shall be no more; when mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things, that is, this world, will have passed away. On that day when the one who is seated on the throne, will makes all things new.

‘Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will..all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then will be fulfilled’ the promise of God, revealed in Christ's resurrection:

“Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

“Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?”