



Sermon

A Passionate Response

John 12:1-8, Philippians 3:4b-14

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John sets the scene by telling us, "It is six days before the Passover." The dinner was the day before the Triumphant entry. ¹ The Lectionary readings are starting to lead us up to the Crucifixion. The tension is mounting to breaking point as the gospel account has gone forward.

At the beginning of John's gospel in the Prologue, he told us of the conflict between light and darkness:

^{1:5} The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it. ...

⁹ The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him. ¹¹ He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ...

As Jesus ministry and teaching have developed his following has increased and the opposition has heightened. The light is shining brilliantly in the world calling people to join his ranks:

John 12:35-36 Then Jesus told them, "You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. The man who walks in the dark does not know where he is going. ³⁶ Put your trust in the light while you have it, so that you may become sons of light."

At the same time the forces of darkness are working to extinguish it. When, as recorded in the previous chapter, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, the reaction of the leaders was to plot his death. ²

John 11:57: The chief priests and Pharisees had given orders that if anyone found out where Jesus was, he should report it so that they might arrest him.

In this tension, Jesus had withdrawn to a quiet village to wait for the Passover feast. Now he visits Mary, Martha and Lazarus arriving in Bethany on the Friday as the Sabbath was about to begin.

Remember the last time, they saw him he had restored Lazarus to life. So this dinner would be given in his honour. What was the motivation Lazarus, Mary and Martha had for this feast? Surely it was gratitude. Martha served them – that was obviously her gift and she used it to honour Jesus.

¹ John 12:1, 12

² John 11:53

Mary's Passionate Response

Mary came with precious perfume and anointed Jesus with it. This perfume was imported from India and this Roman pound (340gm) was stated to cost about a year's income for a labourer. That is a lot to spend. In our terms about \$30,000.³ Certainly, she was deeply grateful for the restoring of her brother's life. But maybe there is more. The two sisters had met Jesus when he arrived as Lazarus was dead in the tomb. He had spoken with Martha and in that conversation had assured her that her brother would rise from the dead. She responded with commendable faith that she knew he will rise again in the general resurrection. To this, Jesus responded,

"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" "Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."⁴

If it was not so before, they then knew that Jesus was the Messiah that Israel had awaited for over a thousand years. They had understood that he was the Son of God. Of course, they would pour out all they had for this one even had he not befriended them. Her anointing of him was an act of extravagant worship.

John tells us the smell filled the whole house. It would! This was a lot of strong spice. Mark tells us she poured it on his head⁵. From there it would have run down over his clothes even to his feet. I remember visiting a black Pentecostal church in Nottingham. During the service they anointed a woman for healing. It was not a smear of oil on the forehead as we do, they had a jug of oil – and it was poured out over her head. It ran down her hair, over her top, her skirt dripping onto the carpet. It made me squirm inside at the thought of cleaning up the mess but there was no denying the generosity and fullness of the image. Well, this is like that – the spice was poured over him and ran all over the place. If the whole house smelled of the spice, you can bet he smelled of it. His clothes, his skin would have carried the smell of that widely generous act. It is probable that he went through the next week still smelling that gift even to the cross!

But there was someone else there too. Judas objected to the waste of money which could have been given to the poor. That sounds good doesn't it? But did he care about the poor? John tells us explicitly that Judas did not care but that he was a thief. Judas was the keeper of the common purse and he took from it for himself. The reasonable inference is that Judas would like the perfume to have been sold and the money to have put into his care. Matthew telling us about the same event continues straight on to Judas' agreement with the chief priests to betray Jesus.⁶ Now why was Judas the group's treasurer? Surely because he had some aptitude in that area. You don't give that job to the person who has no head for money. So Judas had the gift for handling money but see how his passions affected its use: He stole from the common purse; he resented Mary's extravagance and even in betraying Jesus he turned it into a financial transaction for his own benefit. He could have betrayed Jesus for no money. But no, his greed had to be served. Perhaps Jesus' warning from the Sermon on the Mount had application to Judas:

"No-one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money."⁷

Judas came to despise Jesus and turned to money. The way we use our gifts depends on our motivations which come from our passions.

Mary has truly understood who Jesus is and there cannot be too much to give to God himself. She has given him her best. Her action contrasts with the disciples six days later as no one washes their feet and Jesus stoops to do it himself. She has washed his feet and dried them with her hair!

³ An average labouring wage in NZ

⁴ John 11:25-27

⁵ Mark 14:3

⁶ Matthew 26:14ff

⁷ Matthew 6:24

How extravagant are you in your giving to Jesus? Martha said, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world." Do you believe that? Is he worth your special cherished possession? Would you pour yourself out for him because of who he is?

There will always be nay-sayers like Judas – those who do not hold the same values and therefore will not – cannot – see the rightness of the offering.

Mary gave to Jesus out of the awe of who he is and her gratitude for what he had done.

Paul's Passionate Response

In the epistle Paul shows his passion for the Jesus too. Initially his passion was caught up in keeping the Law. He could boast of being the ideal Hebrew. He had all the advantages of Jewish scholarship. He was not just an ordinary observant Jew, he was a Pharisee, the very name means *set apart*. They were meticulous in keeping the Law. There were over 600 commandments in the Law of Moses and to ensure they did not accidentally break any the Pharisee was exacting in his attempts to obey every one. For example, the Law said you should not work on the Sabbath. "Ah, but what is work?" One ruling was that you could not empty dishwater out the window, because if you did it, there might be a seed where the water fell and if it grew, you would have sown which was obviously work! Did you notice, that Paul regarded himself as having been faultless in keeping the Law. His zeal for the Law was displayed in his readiness to persecute those Jews who followed the Way of Jesus. That meant he arrested them and brought them to trial so that they might be executed.

Then his life turned around when he had a revelation of Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God and was given the new life. From opposing he became a dedicated follower. All that he had previously valued he counted as rubbish. His efforts to earn salvation and favour with God – trash; his boasting in his birthright and upbringing – garbage; his hatred of the disciples was turned around to preaching the very message he had persecuted before. Now he knew a righteousness given by God. This was immeasurably superior to his best efforts which still fell short of God's standards.

Did you hear how great his motivation had been though? It is no easy task to keep all those rules. Now his passion, his great motivation has swung around and was devoted to Jesus. He just wanted to follow and obey him. He said in verse 14,

"I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus."

Two people recognised who Jesus was and responded passionately and appropriately. They set him first and highest. As Lord and Saviour, he had the right to their full obedience and they gave it.

I talked last week about the Prodigal Son and invited people to come forward if they needed to come to the Father to ask forgiveness or maybe to repent of a hard heart to other sinners who offend us because they don't keep our rules. This week, we are challenged to consider whether our response to Jesus – who he is and what he has done for us – is too measured, too cautious, too mean.

What might we give? I would have to say many of us are very measured in our devotion. We could give the Lord more prayer – or to put that better more of our attention. We could put him far higher in our list of priorities. We could be more ready to serve him in practical roles. What matters more is the giving of our hearts to him and serving from that relationship.