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Sermon “All for Jesus ...”

John 12:1-8

7th April 2019

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At the beginning of John’s gospel, in the Prologue, we are told 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 of Christ was shining brilliantly in the world calling people to join his ranks:

John 12:35a&b 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."

At the same time the forces of darkness are working to extinguish it. This dinner at Bethany comes after the raising of Lazarus from death to life. Even at the beginning of that account, Jesus says it will lead towards his death. "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." (John 11:4) That is in John’s code language – whenever that expression is used in the fourth gospel it refers to the crucifixion.¹ When Jesus raised Lazarus from the tomb, the price was his own death soon to follow. This miracle caused so many to follow Jesus that leaders plotted his death.²

[The Chief Priest said], "You do not realise that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish." ...⁵³ So from that day on they plotted to take his life.³

John sets the scene at the beginning of our Gospel reading today by telling us, "It is six days before the Passover." The dinner was the day before the Triumphal entry. ⁴ Our readings are starting to lead us up to the Crucifixion. The tension is mounting to breaking point as the gospel account goes forward.

¹ John 11:4, 12:16, 23, 28, 13:32, 17:1, 5,

² John 11:53

³ John 11:50, 53

⁴ John 12:1, 12

Jesus had withdrawn to a quiet village to wait for the Passover feast.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. This dinner was given in his honour. What motivation had Lazarus, Mary and Martha for this feast? Surely it was gratitude.

Mary's Passionate Response

Mary came with precious perfume and anointed Jesus with it. Nard was grown in the Himalayas. A pound of it was stated to cost about a labourer's annual income. That is a lot! In our terms about \$30,000.⁵ 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 he'd 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."⁶

If it was not clear before, they then knew that Jesus was the Messiah that Israel had waited for over a thousand years. They had understood that he was the Son of God.

How would you respond if you were convinced you were meeting God in a body – when you got beyond thinking, "It can't be"? If you heard him teach, followed him around invited him to your house - how would you make sense of that? How would you express your heart to him?

Of course, they would pour out all they had for this. Her anointing of him was an act of extravagant worship.

John tells us the smell filled the whole house. It would! It was a lot of strong spice. Mark, in his telling of the same event, wrote that she poured it on his head⁷. 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 – all of it - over her head. It ran down her hair, over her top, her skirt dripping onto the carpet. It made me squirm 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. He would have gone through the next week still smelling that gift! The smell of the nard would have been on Jesus through his trial, all the way to the cross. He understood that she had intended it for his burial anointing. Through all that hatred, rejection and torture, he would have smelt the evidence of her devotion.

But there was someone else on whom the spotlight shines too. Judas objected to this waste of money. It could have been sold and 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 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 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.⁸ 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

⁵ An average labouring wage in NZ

⁶ John 11:25-27

⁷ Mark 14:3

⁸ Matthew 26:14ff

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.⁹

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 had 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 when no one washes their feet and Jesus stoops to do it himself. She has washed his feet and dried them with her hair! Her act of worship must have been in his mind when he bent down to wash their feet.

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. We know who he is and we know more than she did at that time of what he was about to do in his death and resurrection. So 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, frankly 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. Yet what matters more is the giving of our hearts to him and serving from that relationship.

As we go through the rest of Lent to Good Friday, may the scent of Mary's gift linger in our memories and cause us for our part to love him more than ever. Amen.

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⁹ Matthew 6:24