



Sermon

Sweetness amid the Storm Clouds

John 12:1-8

3rd April 2022

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It is Easter in just two weeks' time. As Lent draws on, our readings turn us towards the story of what happened in the Jewish month of Nisan AD33. As we go through these next two weeks with Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday we will hear again the account of those dreadful, yet for us, life-changing days. So let's set the scene for this meal at Bethany.

Would it surprise you to learn that John Chapter 12 comes after Chapter 11? And actually Chapter 10 comes before that and maybe you realise that Chapter 9 is earlier. These are not randomised stories, but there is a progression of events.

Chapter 9 - Blind Man

In Chapter 9, we told of the healing in Jerusalem of the man born blind. Already at this stage the leaders are set against Jesus and the man is thrown out of the synagogue because he said Jesus was the Christ.

Chapter 10 - Good Shepherd

Chapter 10 carries on in the same conversation and Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd. As the Chapter continues they take up stones to kill him.

Jesus said, "At my Father's direction I have done many good works. For which one are you going to stone me?" They replied, "We're stoning you not for any good work, but for blasphemy! You, a mere man, claim to be God."

Some people say, "Jesus never claimed to be divine." Have they ever read the Gospels? Jesus answered:

"Why do you call it blasphemy when I say, 'I am the Son of God'? After all, the Father set me apart and sent me into the world. Don't believe me unless I carry out my Father's work. But if I do his work, believe in the evidence of the miraculous works I have done, even if you don't believe me. Then you will know and understand that the Father is in me, and I am in the Father." Once again they tried to arrest him, but he got away and left them.

He went and ministered by the Jordan River for a short time and many believed in him.

Chapter 11 - Lazarus

In Chapter 11 a message came from Mary and Martha that Lazarus ill. When he told his disciples they were going there they protested that the Jewish leaders had just been seeking to stone him - why would he go back again? Thomas even said, "Let's go, too -- and die with Jesus." You might think Thomas is being a bit of an Eeyore but maybe it was a realistic appreciation of the risk.

There followed the raising of Lazarus to life after being dead for three days. That had a massive impact!

Two Responses

There were two responses - belief and rejection:

- Verse 45: "Many of the people who were with Mary believed in Jesus when they saw this happen."
- Verse 46: "But some went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done."

The Pharisees and the leading priests took council out of concern that he was doing miracles and "if we allow him to go on like this, soon everyone will believe in him. Then the Roman army will come and destroy both our Temple and our nation."

And so they began to plot his death and gave orders to arrest him ... the storm clouds are darkening!

Meanwhile, Jesus withdrew with his disciples to a village called Ephraim about 22km NE. But he would not stay away for long - Passover was approaching. To obey the Law, Jesus had to attend the feast but more than that he knew he was to fulfil the meaning of the Passover. Hadn't John the Baptist announced, "Behold the Lamb of God!" when he first came to public notice?

So it was six days before the Passover, that Jesus and his disciples returned to Bethany on their way to Jerusalem. He probably arrived on the Friday afternoon, rested for the Sabbath so this evening meal would be the Saturday night.

The Dinner

What would be the mood of such a dinner? Lazarus had been dead but was now sitting and eating at the table. When he was restored to life, there would have been turmoil and the emotional exhaustion. We hear from Tanzania that whenever there is a crisis like a death or a big celebration, people gather and the expectation is that they be fed. When Bishop Given first visited us here in 2012, there was a crisis back at home. A pastor had been arrested on false charges brought by some Muslims who wanted the church out of their village and denied the church's title to the land. To support this pastor, many had gathered in the town and the expectation was that the Bishop would feed them! They had eaten all Lillian's supplies and the money that was supposed to support her for another several months.

When Lazarus died, many had come to console Mary and Martha in their loss. They were still there when Lazarus was raised three days later. Martha would have been run off her feet! Then there was all the drama of dismay at opening the tomb, fear and horror on seeing something stirring inside, excitement, incredulity, explanations, shouting, crying, laughing, hearts bursting with joy, amazement, wonder. It would have been exhausting! Then Jesus had gone away again.

What would be the mood? How would you feel if your brother had been dead for three days and then Jesus restored him to life before your eyes? On reflection surely they want to pour out their thanks to him.

Mary came with precious perfume and anointed Jesus with it. Nard was grown in the Himalayas. A pound of it cost about a labourer's annual income. That is a lot! In our terms that is at least \$30,000. Certainly, she was deeply grateful for the restoration of her brother's life. But surely there was more? When Jesus said to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life. ... Do you believe this?"

She had replied, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."

It had been stated! He is the Messiah, the Son of God. How would you respond – when you got beyond thinking, "It can't be"? 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?

Wouldn't you pour out all you had for him? Mary's 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 of the best quality - not diluted to make it go further and to be cheaper. Mark, in his telling of the same event, wrote that she poured it on his head. 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 discrete smear of oil on the forehead as we do, they had a jug of oil which looked like at least 750ml – and they poured it – all of it - over her head! It poured over her hair, cascaded over her blouse and dripped from her skirt 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 be sure that 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! Think of it! The smell of the nard would have been on Jesus through his trial, all the way to the cross. Through all the hatred, the rejection and torture, he was smelling the assurance of her devotion.

Mary had truly understood who Jesus is and that we cannot give too much 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?

Mary gave to Jesus out of awe of who he is. We know who he is and also we know the significance of his death and resurrection. So we are challenged to consider our response to Jesus: Who he is and what he has done for us?

What might we give? We are culturally very restrained 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. What matters most is giving him our hearts.

- How do we show the Lord that we love him?
- Is our love for Jesus given extravagantly or cautiously?
- Are we willing, as Paul said, to share in Jesus' sufferings that we might experience his resurrection?

What follows this dinner in Bethany? John tells us in verse 9ff that a large crowd found that Jesus was at Bethany and came to see Jesus and also to see Lazarus miraculously raised from the dead and many were putting their faith in him. And so it was the next day we have the Triumphal entry when Jesus rode into Jerusalem - but that is next week's story.

As we continue 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 find ways to love him more than ever. Amen.