

Mark 14.1 - 8: Jesus anointed at Bethany

1 It was two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him; 2 for they said, "Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people." 3 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. 4 But some were there who said to one another in anger, "Why was the ointment wasted in this way? 5 For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor." And they scolded her. 6 But Jesus said, "Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. 7 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. 8 She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. 9 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."

As we continue with the theme of the lent course this year, that of 'mirroring Gods love', this morning we will be looking at how we are called to mirror Gods love to each other. And this morning we find ourselves confronted with the peculiar story of extravagant love in our reading from Mark's Gospel. A love not being shown by Jesus to someone else, but rather a nameless woman showing extravagant love to Jesus.

In the story, Jesus is at his friend Simon the Leper's house, somewhere he seems to frequent, as Mark previously comments in chapters 10 and 11 that Jesus often goes from Jerusalem to Bethany to stay, presumably at this same place. Jesus is reclined at the dinner table, most probably talking and discussing after a meal. Perhaps people were talking to Jesus about what he had been doing in Bethany. We know from the other gospels that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead in Bethany, and that he did other miracles there as well. And suddenly into this picture of a rather nice little cosy after dinner discussion comes a woman, who interrupts proceedings by pouring a rather expensive bottle of perfume over Jesus head.

So who on earth is this woman and what is she doing? For a moment I want to improvise a little, to playfully imagine who this woman was, and why she is pouring perfume over Jesus' head?

She has clearly been affected by Jesus in some way – to her he is someone very special. Perhaps she herself is one of the people whom Jesus had healed? The story is set at night, so perhaps earlier in the day she had come to Jesus and asked to be healed? Perhaps she was a mother whose son or daughter Jesus had healed? Perhaps she was a friend of Lazarus' who was overjoyed that Jesus had raised him from the dead? Perhaps she was someone who had committed some crime and was about to be punished, maybe even stoned, when Jesus turns up and sets her free? Or perhaps she had just observed Jesus from a distance and followed him around marvelling at the things he said and did?

Whatever had happened to her I feel sure that she has met Jesus before, whether

from a distance or up close. And that through this encounter she had been changed, hope had been stirred up in her heart, perhaps hope that Jesus might be the one who would save his people, that he would rescue Israel from her plight. Maybe Jesus was the first person to treat her with respect, to love her as she was, and in doing so she saw in him the love and acceptance of God for both herself and everyone around her.

Perhaps she even recognised Jesus as the long awaited messiah, spoken of by the prophets, and perhaps she saw his destiny not as one who was a mighty warrior, who would cast Rome from the land by force but rather as one who would suffer and die for his people.

We will never know who she was, we will never know more about her than is contained within this story, we know not her name, her age or where she lived or what she did. But this person Jesus, compelled her to enter someone house during dinner, which as a woman would have been socially unacceptable, for as a woman she was to prepare and serve dinner, but not to stay, her place was back in the kitchen or another part of the home. But so compelled was she that she risks offending others and tarnishing her own name all to pour out her love upon Jesus. Her life had been transformed in some way, she had been given life in a new way, something so precious that it forces within her a reaction so strong.

But what about Jesus? Most of the stories we read about Jesus usually present him as someone speaking wise words, or healing somebody. But not in this story. In fact he is almost a secondary character, sidelined by the actions of this woman. She is the one who is pouring out a soothing, healing, loving balm upon Jesus. Jesus is the one receiving, he is not giving. I don't think we are used to the idea of Jesus receiving love, or even as someone who needed to be loved and cherished. Yet here Jesus is, being shown love, being vulnerable in accepting love and being soothed by it.

This Jesus is not some robot, merely fulfilling his messianic duties in coming to earth as a man, healing and teaching before going to the cross dying and rising again before popping back to heaven. This Jesus is a normal human being, like you and I, needing love and affection, like you and I. As such Jesus is not only the perfect image of God, but also the perfect image of humanity, for we do not live alone and detached, but rather we need connectedness to each other, we each need love, affection and affirmation, we each need extravagant acts of love to be shown to us, not all the time, but certainly from time to time.

I think this story holds two clues for us as to how we may mirror Gods love in loving each other. Firstly, we need to accept Gods love for ourselves, accepting Gods extravagant invitation to Gods banqueting table, a place of fellowship and relationship with God. Jesus extended this invitation to all he met: lepers, the poor, the widows, prostitutes, orphans, the lame, blind, soldiers and foreigners and everyone else, including each one of us. I believe this woman accepted Jesus' invitation, she probably heard what Jesus had been saying in and around Jerusalem and had seen his love in action.

And as we, just like this woman, accept this incredible gospel, this good news that God desires fellowship with us, that God adores and loves us, each one of us, so we can in turn learn to love ourselves as God loves us. Just as Jesus accepted the love offered from this woman each of us in accepting God's love will learn to love ourselves all the more.

Secondly, out of this acceptance of God's abundant love for us and a renewed love for ourselves comes an overflow of love for others. We begin to see people differently, not as allies or as foes, as is often the case in the church, not as people who need to believe the right things before we would consider being in relationship with them, but rather each person is the same as ourselves, loved, cherished and created by God, and as such is to be loved and cherished by us. People do not need to change in order to be loveable, people are loveable just as they are, just as we are loveable just as we are.

As we celebrate the Eucharist today we celebrate God's love and acceptance of us. In taking the bread and the wine we welcome God's acceptance of us and continue in the process of accepting ourselves as we are. We then take this extravagant acceptance with us, it is what we are to be known for, our extravagant, radical accepting love of one another. This is what Jesus cries out for in the garden of Gethsemane when he prays that we 'would be one'. This is what Paul talks of when he says 'we are all of one body', held together by strands of love. Jesus says that this woman will be remembered because of the love she has shown, and as such, she is a model for us. Let us desire to be known by our acts of charity and love towards one another. Mirroring God's love towards us.

I want to finish by reading a poem by Janet Morley which was written about this story in Mark. It is entitled, 'I sat alone'.

In the midst of company I sat alone,
and the hand of death took hold of me;
I was cold with secrecy,
and my God was far away.
For this did my mother conceive me,
and to seek this pain did I come forth?
Did her womb nourish me for dust,
or her breasts, for me to drink bitterness?
O that my beloved would hold me
and gather me in her arms;
and that the darkness of God might comfort me,
and that this cup might pass me by.
I was desolate, and she came to me;
and when there was neither hope nor help for pain
she was by my side;
in the shadow of the grave she restored me.
My cup was spilling with betrayal,
but she filled it with wine;
my face wet with fear,
but she anointed me with oil,

and my hair is damp with myrrh.
The scent of her love surrounds me;
it is more than I can bear.
She has touched me with authority;
in her hands I find strength.
For she acts on behalf of the broken,
and her silence is the voice of the unheard.
Though many murmur against her,
I will praise her;
and in the name of the unremembered,
I will remember her.

As we look forward to Easter when we remember our baptismal vows and renew our commitment to follow Christ and to be his ambassadors here on earth let us recall to mind Christ's words, 'Today I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should love one another.'
Amen.