

MATT 26.6-13; MARY WHO LOVED HIM

[Chelmsford 10 February 2013]

When love is in the air the message of the florist is "*Say it with flowers*".
This morning I want us to look at *a woman who said it with perfume*.
I want us to look at Mary, the woman who loved Jesus

Matthew tells us that this amazing act of love took place in **Bethany** (26.6).
Bethany is a village about 3 kms from Jerusalem on the road to Jericho.
It was there that Jesus' friends, Mary, Martha & Lazarus lived.

Presumably it was while he was staying with his friends that Jesus was invited out for a meal
"**in the house of Simon the leper**" – or as the GNB described him: "**Simon, a man who had suffered from a dreaded skin disease**" (26.6).

We do not know who "**Simon the leper**" was.
This is the only time he features in the Gospels.
He was presumably a well-known local figure.
Some have speculated that he was related to Mary, Martha & Lazarus.

The nickname "**the leper**" refers to Simon having previously suffered from leprosy.
He would not have been able to have invited Jesus for a meal had he been still suffering from leprosy. It is possible that Jesus had healed this Simon. Indeed, it may well be that Simon invited Jesus and his disciples to dinner as a 'thank-you' for healing him.

Whatever it was, as a result of that invitation there came what has been called "*an oasis of sweetness in the desert of bitterness*".

- Yes, at that moment things were pretty bad for Jesus. Just before Mary comes on the scene, Matthew informs us that "**the chief priests and the elders met together....., and made plans to arrest Jesus secretly and put him to death**" (Matt 26.3-4).
- The story of the anointing is then immediately followed by the decision of Judas to betray Jesus (26.14-16).

Hate was very much in the air. But there at table in Simon's house Jesus received one of the very last acts of kindness he ever experienced in his earthly life.

Matthew tells us that while Jesus was eating "**a woman came to him**" (v7)
If we only had Matthew's Gospel to go on, then we might well question the kind of woman she was. For it was not the custom for respectable women to barge into what would have otherwise have been a men-only social function. Indeed, one commentator draws attention to the practice to hire or invite local prostitutes for the pleasure of male guests.....
But this woman was no prostitute. For although Matthew does not tell us her name, John in his Gospel tells us that she was Mary, the sister of Lazarus.

Mary came "**with an alabaster jar filled with a very expensive perfume which she poured on his head**" (v7)

We learn from John as also Mark that this "**perfume**" was made of nard, a sweet-smelling plant native to North India - the perfume would have travelled quite a way.

This perfume was contained within "**an alabaster jar**". Alabaster gets its name from *Alabastron*, a place in Egypt where they quarried fine marble!

The term 'jar' suggests to me something sizeable – but that is very unlikely if it contained an

expensive perfume. The NEB therefore speaks of it being “**a small bottle**”. We know that in Palestine women often carried little phials of highly concentrated and very precious perfume - these phials were worn on a chain around their necks. This perfume was so concentrated & so precious that it could only be used one drop at a time. I.e. this was no ordinary perfume - indeed, we discover that it was so expensive that it would have made even Chanel No 7 seem like cheap toilet water.

“**She poured**” the perfume “**on his head**” (v3)
Indeed, John and Mark tell us, she poured all of it - this was an incredible act!
Instead of pouring just a single drop, she poured out the whole lot.
Not surprisingly the disciples were stunned.
They were shocked by the sheer extravagance of her action.
And then their shock turned to anger: ‘**Why all this waste?**’, they asked. ‘**This perfume could have been sold for a large amount and the money given to the poor!**’ (26.8-9)

For this bottle of perfume was no ordinary Eau de Cologne
Mark in his Gospel tells us that it cost “**300 denarii**”
A denarius was the average daily wage for a working man
So 300 denarii was almost a year’s wages. Wow - could you imagine it?
Could you imagine blowing a year’s wages in this way?

No wonder the disciples were angry with her. Mary seemed to be out of her mind.
Why did she do it? Why did she make such an extravagant gesture?
A number of suggestions have been made:

i) Mary welcomed Jesus as an honoured guest

In the ancient world, Jewish and pagan alike, it was customary to refresh guests at banquets by pouring cool and fragrant ointment on their heads.
So we read in Psalm 23.5: “**you anoint my head with oil**”.
Significantly the GNB translates this verse: “**You welcome me as an honoured guest**”.
It may therefore be that in this case we simply have an ordinary courtesy carried to an extreme. This woman gave Jesus the works - she anointed him well & truly!

ii) She confessed Jesus as the Messiah

In the ancient Near East anointing the head with oil could signify selection for some special role or task. In this respect we have a number of examples in the OT: e.g.

- Aaron was anointed when he was consecrated a priest (Ex 29.7)
- Saul was anointed by Samuel as a sign that he was king of Israel (1 Sam 10.1)
- Similarly Jehu was anointed by Elisha as king over Israel (2 Kings 9.3,6)

It may be that Mary by anointing Jesus was recognising him as the Messiah.
After all, the Hebrew word *Messiah* and the Greek word *Christ* both mean ‘**anointed one**’.
If so, then this was perhaps an acted confession of faith. As one commentator put it: “*He who had been anointed by the Spirit - viz. at his baptism - is now fittingly anointed with oil*” (CEB Cranfield).

If this is the case, if Mary had recognised Jesus to be the Messiah, then her act of extravagance would be understandable.
It would be like the Queen coming to tea. We would pull out all the stops.

iii) Mary anticipated Jesus' death

There is another possibility. For Jesus suggests that she anticipated his death. Look at v12: **“What she did was to pour this perfume on my body to get me ready for burial”**.

Was Mary psychic? Did she see the gathering storm?

Or perhaps ‘psychic’ is the wrong word.

Was she simply an intuitive who somehow realised that Jesus would end up dying on a Cross, and that in so doing he would be unlikely to be given a proper burial?

In support of this view is that, according to Mark and John, when Mary anointed Jesus, she didn't just take out the stopper and pour out the oil, - she broke the bottle.

This is significant because in Palestine, when the dead were anointed, the flask which had contained the perfume was broken, and its fragments were laid in the tomb with the body.

Frankly, I don't know whether Mary possessed such insight.

Clearly, however, Jesus knew what lay ahead.

Just before the meal, he had said to his disciples: **“In two days, as you know, it will be the Passover Festival, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified”** (26.2).

Jesus knew, that when a man was crucified, he was often denied the courtesy of a proper burial – let alone the anointing of the body that was part of a Jewish burial.

For that reason he at least interpreted the anointing as a preparation for his burial.

Incidentally, do notice that Jesus knew that his enemies would not have the last word.

He knew that his death was not to be the end. Look at v13: **“Now I assure you that wherever this gospel is preached all over the world, what she has done will be told in memory of her”**. That is an amazing statement.

Jesus knew that the Romans could not put him down.

Barclay: *“It didn't occur to him that his work should be obliterated; already he heard the story of the gospel echoing down the corridors of time”*. Jesus knew that people would crucify him - but he also knew that they were powerless to eliminate him from history!

iv) Mary expressed her love for Jesus

Jesus may have interpreted Mary's anointing in terms of a preparation for death, but it seems to me that her real motive was that of love.

She loved him – that is why she poured the expensive oil over him

This does not mean that she loved Jesus in some kind of romantic or sexual sense.

Certainly there are no grounds for believing that Jesus ended up marrying Mary

Yet this has been suggested by Barbara Thiering, an Australian writer, who draws attention to Song of Solomon 1.12 where we read: **“while the king was on his couch, my nard gave forth its fragrance”**. Thiering comments: *“The Song of Solomon was the wedding liturgy of the Davidic kings, a beautiful verbal accompaniment of the ceremonies”*. From this she jumps to the idea that Mary's anointing of Jesus inevitably had erotic connections.

What rubbish! Mary was not in love with Jesus in a romantic or erotic kind of way. Rather she was incredibly grateful to Jesus - for Jesus had done the impossible and brought back to life her brother, Lazarus.

No wonder she loved Jesus - wouldn't you?

No wonder she poured out this incredibly expensive perfume on Jesus - wouldn't you?

Who wouldn't be prepared to give up a year's wages if only they could have back their brother, their mother, their father or their wife.

Her extravagance is understandable - she owed her brother's life to him.

Yes, Mary loved Jesus – she loved Jesus in an extraordinarily extravagant way.

That then is the story. The question is: what does this story have to say to us?

1. LOVE IS ALWAYS EXTRAVAGANT

In the first instance, the story of Mary and her expensive perfume reminds us that true love is always extravagant.

Love never counts the cost – if you think twice about how much you are spending on your girl-friend, then she is not much of a girl-friend.

Love never gives a gift with the price tag on it – or if you do, then frankly you are not much of a boy friend.

Love is always unreasonable.

If that is not true in your experience, then I question whether you have experienced love.

Love is always extravagant.

Love gives its all, and its only regret is that it has not still more to give.

2. GOD'S LOVE IS AMAZINGLY EXTRAVAGANT

Secondly, with bread and wine before us on the Table, we are reminded that God's love for us is amazingly extravagant.

For the bread speaks of the body of Jesus broken for us – and the wine speaks of the life of Jesus poured out for us.

Yes, the bread and wine speak of God's amazing love. In the the words of John 3.16: **“God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son”** – can you think of a love more extravagant than that?

Jesus said: **“The greatest love a person can have for his friends is to give his life for them”** (John 15.13) – and Jesus did this for us long before we were his friends.

As Paul wrote to the church at Rome: **“For when we were still helpless, Christ died for the wicked at the time that God chose. It is a difficult thing for someone to die for a righteous person. It may even be that someone might dare to die for a good person. But God has shown us how much he love us – it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us”** (Rom 5.6-8)

3. HOW MUCH DO WE LOVE JESUS?

The love of Mary for Jesus, and the love of God for us in Jesus, in turn raise the question: how much do we love Jesus?

Mary in a moment of devotion was prepared to give the equivalent of a year's wages to show her love for Jesus.

Indeed, if the truth be told, the expensive perfume represented all that she had. I doubt whether Mary had savings in the bank. When she poured out that perfume, she poured out her all. Yes, she loved Jesus with in an amazing act of extravagant devotion.

How much do we love Jesus?

Do we love in moderation – like the lukewarm Christians of Laodicea?

Or we do love like Mary – extravagantly?

Love, of course, is not just a matter of the heart

True love wells up, overflows, and expresses itself not least in giving

My friends, let me earth my sermon in a pastoral reality.

In so doing, I know I will not get a round of applause as our preacher did last Sunday.

But I would be failing in my duty as your pastor if I did not make this particular application.

Last month at the church meeting we set a new budget for the coming financial year.

This budget involves an increase in our giving of 9.5%.

Why such an increase, you might ask?

The reality is that in recent years we have become over-dependent on our church lettings – but then in the last couple of years these lettings have halved, with the result that we have suddenly found ourselves spending more than we were receiving. The increased budget to a large extent reflects the fact that we are having to fund the church from giving.

Some question whether the money is there is in the church. I believe it is.

Yes, we have some who are not earning, we have many who are on pensions, but as I discovered when I went through the church handbook this week, we have also 162 church members who are in full-time employment, not counting the many friends of the church who attend Sunday by Sunday.

I have little doubt if we all took seriously the teaching of the Bible to give proportionately and systematically to God's church, the money would be there.

At the end of the day it is down to the question of love – love for Jesus.

Please, I do not want to pressure those of you who are already giving sacrificially

Many of you have more than proved your love for Jesus

But others perhaps have yet to prove their love for Jesus.

My friends, as you receive the signs of Jesus' love for you, ask yourself: '*How much do I love Jesus?*'

Remember that we as a church are a missionary organization

Our mission is to go the way of Jesus and make disciples

Our mission, in other words, is to show the love of Jesus – and to tell others of the love of Jesus.

This is why we need your money – we need your money that others may know of God's amazing love for them.

If God is speaking to you this morning, then let me encourage you to make one of the following practical responses:

1. Use a yellow card to ask for envelopes to help you give regularly
2. Use a yellow card to request a standing-order form as also a gift-aid form to help you give regularly
3. If you already give regularly through the envelope scheme or through the use of a standing order, but realize God is challenging you to give more, use a yellow card to signal that you will be increasing your giving – we don't want to know by how much – that is between you and God – but signing a card will remind you that today you made a commitment.

Whatever your response, remember that God has loved you – he has loved me – way beyond our deserving. He deserves all our love – and more. To him be the glory!