

The Worth of the King - Matthew 26.1-16

Date: 26 February 2023, 1st Sunday in Lent

Location: St George's Battery Point

Series: Matthew's Passion

Texts: Psalm 145, Philippians 3:7-14, Matthew 26:1-16

What is your greatest treasure? Sometimes I wonder, if the house was burning down, what would I grab as I made a speedy exit? I haven't asked Claire this, but here's what I would get. On my bookshelf are 2 family heirlooms. An Apocrypha printed in 1750 and a Geneva Bible, printed in 1599. It's been rebound several times. The first 20 chapters of Genesis are missing. But it's over 400 years old. It's my greatest treasure. Except of course, if I grabbed the books and left the kids inside, you'd say that I didn't quite have my priorities right.

We're starting a new sermon series today looking at Matthew chapter 26-28, his account of Jesus' passion. We use the word passion to speak about strong emotions or the great loves in our life - she has a passion for sailing - but the word comes from the Latin *passio*, to suffer. The word appears in the creed - Jesus *suffered* under Pontius Pilate. Matthew's passion is his account of Christ's suffering or passion. In these weeks leading up to Easter we're going to walk with Matthew through the final days of Jesus life, his trial, suffering and death, before celebrating his glorious resurrection on Easter day. As we walk with Matthew we'll meditate on who Jesus is and why he suffered for us. Through the encounters Jesus has with different people during his passion we will reflect on our own responses to Christ.

Today we begin with this extraordinary moment of this woman pouring perfume on Jesus' head. Her story asks the question: What is Jesus worth? It's a question for all of us. What is Jesus worth for you and for me? Let's have a look at Matthew 26 together.

Jesus v Caiaphas 1-5

When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, 2 'As you know, the Passover is two days away – and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.'

3 Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, 4 and they schemed to arrest Jesus secretly and kill him. 5 'But not during the festival,' they said, 'or there may be a riot among the people.'

These verses set up the context for the events that will happen over the following days. It's the time of the Passover, that defining moment in Israel's history, remembered each year, when God rescued them from slavery in Egypt with a mighty hand and outstretched arm. We'll see next week how Jesus interprets his own death through the Passover. But for the moment what stands out is that Jesus knows he will die. The Passover will be the time of his death. He will be crucified. He uses his favourite title for himself - the Son of Man. This comes from Daniel 7, and refers to the one who is given all the authority and power of God. One to whom all nations bow down. One whose kingdom

will have no end. As the Son of Man, he is the one in calm, sovereign control. He knows he will die, but he faces his death calmly.

What stark contrast with the chief priests and elders of the people. They conspire to murder Jesus, but so uncertain is their authority that they have to scheme behind closed doors to do away with Jesus in secret. They are afraid of the crowd swelling Jerusalem for the Passover festival and what they might do. We will see that contest for authority over the coming days. The schemes of man against the Son of Man will be played out. And yet, this is the sovereign plan of God. As Peter later tells the crowd in Jerusalem, *This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.*¹

Jesus anointed 6-13

In verses 6-13 the scene shifts to Bethany.

6 While Jesus was in Bethany in the home of Simon the Leper, **7** a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on his head as he was reclining at the table. We don't know who Simon the Leper was. He may have been someone whom Jesus had healed. All four Gospels retell this event. John says that the woman in the spotlight was in fact Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. He locates this event shortly after Jesus' raising Lazarus from the dead. It's an extraordinary scene. Jesus is at a dinner party with his friends. There in front of everyone, Mary breaks open a jar of the most expensive perfume. The scent instantly fills the room as she pours the perfume on Jesus' head.

8 When the disciples saw this, they were indignant. 'Why this waste?' they asked. **9** 'This perfume could have been sold at a high price and the money given to the poor.'

Why this waste? It's a good question isn't it. This perfume may have been the most expensive thing Mary owned. Imagine the good that could have been done if it was converted to cash. God calls us to love our neighbour, to care for the poor. Christianity is meant to be a practical religion. We're meant to make a difference in the world. Mary's act looks foolish, frivolous, indulgent. And yet how does Jesus respond?

10 Aware of this, Jesus said to them, 'Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me. **11** The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me. **12** When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial. **13** Truly I tell you, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.'

She has done a beautiful thing

What does Jesus want us to see here? First, notice how he treats Mary. The indignant disciples dismiss Mary to her face. They know what's best, men always do. But no, Jesus treats Mary with dignity and respect, like he always treated women. He accepts her gift of love. He honours her. "She has done a beautiful thing to me." "Wherever the gospel is preached, *throughout the world*, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her." And it's true. We're here reading her story today. It's

¹ Acts 2.23

part of Jesus' own story, the Gospel. Even as he faced his death he was looking forward to this being proclaimed throughout the world.

Mary, it turns out, has a far better idea of what is going on than the disciples. She may have accepted Jesus' predictions of his crucifixion, unlike the disciples. We know she was there at the cross, and was also the first at the tomb. In this lavish act of devotion she shows her love for Jesus. Her perfume wafts over the room, and rises from Jesus throughout the coming days, the bitter sweet scent of death, and yet also a sacrifice of love. Jesus' words point to the fact that his body will be buried hastily, without the proper anointing. But the anointing also gestures towards his identity as God's Messiah, his chosen king, soon to be crowned.

The poor you will always have with you

We may be shocked by Jesus' words to the disciples: "The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me." Does this mean that we should do nothing for the poor? The words are a quote from Deuteronomy 15. Here's what the whole verse says: *There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be open-handed towards your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land.*² Far from being a justification for poverty as part of the natural order of things, the existence of the poor, at least according to the Bible, lays upon us an obligation to be generous to them.

So what is Jesus saying? At least this. He is to be our highest priority. That there will always be the poor, at least this side of Jesus bringing in complete justice of the Kingdom of God, means that there is always more for us to do. We can become so busy with our projects, trying to change the world or save this little bit of it, that we forget Jesus. We forget to slow down. We forget to worship. The truth is that actually, Jesus is more important than the poor. It's only when we value him above all else that we'll be freed from the burden of trying to save ourselves or trying to save others and we'll be able to both serve and rest.

Mary's act of extravagant devotion teaches us that Jesus is worth our best. He is not an afterthought, an ad if we have time in our busy lives. Is he most precious to us? Do our priorities reflect Jesus' worth? Does how we spend our time, our finances, how we work, the place corporate worship has in our lives, do they look over the top, outlandish, even irresponsible to those around us, that we're taking this whole Jesus thing too seriously? Like Mary, do we pour out our best for him in worship?

The apostle Paul grasps something of Mary's devotion in our reading from Philippians 3. Considering his former way of life and the things he valued before meeting Jesus, even his own just and upright life, he writes,

But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. 8 What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that

² Deuteronomy 15.11

comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.

Jesus is the pearl of great price. He is worth our best. He is worth our all.

30 pieces of silver - 14-16

You could not get a greater contrast than with the next scene.

14 *Then one of the Twelve – the one called Judas Iscariot – went to the chief priests* **15** *and asked, ‘What are you willing to give me if I deliver him over to you?’ So they counted out for him thirty pieces of silver.* **16** *From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over.*

What is Jesus worth? Apparently 30 pieces of silver.

Just as an aside, Matthew sees this as a typological fulfilment of Zechariah 11.12. There the prophet had sought to lead Israel, but they had rejected his leadership, and paid him the insultingly low price of 30 pieces of silver. These Zechariah throws to the potter in the temple in disgust. In chapter 27 Judas is filled with remorse and attempts to return the money to the chief priests. When he is rebuffed he throws the money into the temple and hangs himself. These parallels add to the sense throughout Matthew’s Gospel that what is happening is God’s plan, the fulfilment of Scripture.

To return to the 30 pieces of silver. It is a ridiculous price to betray an innocent life. Is that what Jesus is worth to Judas? Greed is a more transparent motive for Judas in John’s account. He adds that it was Judas who piped up for the poor, because he had his fingers in the till. But I think Matthew leaves this out to direct our attention to the absurdity of Judas’ actions. How could he sell the greatest treasure for a handful of coins? In selling Jesus he sells himself out and is lost. And yet isn’t that what we do? We’re so often tempted to sell out on Jesus, for a handful of coins, a fleeting pleasure, a word of approval, a taste of control, a little compromise here, a little neglect there. And it’s so easy to take the money in the hand now, and let go of the one who is truly worthy. Matthew invites us in the absurdity of Judas’ betrayal, to see how absurd our betrayals of Christ are, and so resist them and repent of them.

Mary saw what Judas did not. She poured out her love to Jesus, because he had first loved her. Luke’s account of her story tells us that she was well known as woman with a shameful past. But Jesus says “I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven, as her great love has shown.”³ Jesus was worth everything to Mary, because in him she had found full and free forgiveness. That his passion begins with her story, tells us that he has poured out his life not just for Mary, but for you and for me. He is worth our all, because he gave his all, his very life, that we might have life. What is Jesus worth to you? This season, may we see again the worth he places on our lives. And so may we find in him our great treasure, and pour out our lives to him in love and service.

³ Luke 7.47