

ANOINTED AT BETHANY

Introduction

Mary took a very expensive jar of perfume (worth 10 months' wages), broke open the container, and anointed Jesus with it.

Judas' immediate reaction was to complain at the 'waste', as he saw it, protesting that it should have been given to the poor instead. It was understandable in view of the value of the perfume. The real reason, John tells us, was that Judas was a thief. The other disciples, unaware of Judas' thieving, echoed his comments.

Jesus came to Mary's defence, saying she had done a seemingly thing, had done it in anticipation of his burial, and she would be honoured for it.

A reader might wonder what is all this about?

It was an act of worship

In lavishing this on Jesus Mary was making a statement – 'he is worthy'. That is the nature of all worship.

It did not involve anyone else; it was for Jesus alone. There are times when we serve him (and express our devotion) by serving others for he whom he cares. But worship is seen most clearly when he is its centre.

It was an act of self-giving, lavish rather than measured. It is as if she were saying, 'He deserves my all.'

It had to do with Jesus' death

Jesus stated that in her defence.

Jesus had repeatedly stated that he was about to die at the hands of his enemies. Events were also pointing in that direction. Mary had been an avid listener and that resulted in this act of worship.

We suppose it also had to do with the fact that Jesus restored Lazarus her brother to life. Yet her thoughts were mainly on Jesus' death. There was a poignancy in the fact that one was restored while his healer was about to die.

The act of anointing a body in Old Testament times had an element of expectation. Instead of destroying the body (as many societies did) it was preserved. This was more than sentiment – there was a belief in the approaching resurrection of the dead.

For a Christian, acts of worship link Jesus' death with the hope of resurrection. They are motivated by gratitude, awareness of the cost to him, and the value of his work to us.

It reflected Jesus' spirit

Two thoughts seem to have been in the disciples' minds when they witnessed Mary's action – extravagant, and uselessness.

It was way above anything that would normally be done. There seemed to be a lack of proportion (or so they thought). But our giving to the Lord reflects what we think of him. That suggests she valued Jesus more highly than they did.

Linked to the idea of extravagance was the idea of uselessness in the sense that it did not bring any benefit. That was the reason for Judas' comment – 'It could have been sold for 300 denarii and the

money given to the poor'. Far from bringing benefit to anyone Mary's action meant it could not be used any more – it seemed a waste.

The contrast between Mary's attitude and the disciples' attitude speaks volumes. They were thinking in commercial terms – maximising benefit while minimising outlay. In the commercial world that is appropriate and good stewardship. But it is not appropriate for human relationships, and it does not take account of God's infinite goodness.

Love does not look for personal advantage or reward; it is entirely concerned with the good of the other person. The loving person can therefore give everything away and not feel they have lost anything. The second great commandment is to, 'Love your neighbour as yourself'.

Jesus saw that love among fallen humanity may be no more than concern for our own group, so he taught, 'Love your enemies, bless those who curse you.' He also said, 'If you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect' (Matthew 5:44-48).

This shows that God is calling his people to beyond 'normal' love and show the Father's Spirit in their dealings with others. Why should anyone believe that our faith is true if we do no more than they do?

The Father's gift would be considered extravagant – 'his only begotten Son'. Jesus gift would be considered extravagant – 'he gave himself'. Yet that is the revelation of God and the heart of Christianity.

Their gifts would be considered of no use. What benefit does God get from it? None! We might give something knowing we would receive nothing back, but God has given himself.

If we had to deal with enemies, we might reject them. God does the opposite. God's gift to sinful humanity is lavish. 'When we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son' (Romans 5:10).

When God's love is in action he does not count the cost. He thinks only about the blessing the person is going to receive. That is so different from so much human activity – and it comes across as genuine and trustworthy since there is nothing in it for him.

Jesus defended and promoted it

What a comfort! To have Jesus come to our defence when everyone is against us. That is he did for Mary. He had good reason to. He was not only defending her, he was defending truth and right – the very nature of God. Like Satan, fallen humanity thinks its standards and wisdom are better than God's.

Jesus approves of your worship especially when you remember his death. Others wonder what you see in him and are not interested. To others, your place at his table seems to perform no useful function, they say you are wasting your time and would be better doing something 'useful'. But Jesus regards it as the appropriate response to his love for you.

He approves of the love you show to others for his sake. You may go out of your way in your dealings with other believers, or to bring people into his kingdom. Others think you are wasting your time, but Jesus affirms what you are doing.

He promised to reward Mary. And he has kept his promise – everywhere the gospel story is told we hear what she did. That reflects the reward the Father gave to Jesus. Under the whole heaven the name of Jesus is honoured because of the love he showed when he died to save perishing sinners. And if we show that same spirit – he will reward us too.

Indeed, Jesus promoted that spirit when he said, 'The poor you have with you always'. There are many poor people around us – they may be poor materially, socially, or spiritually.

He calls us to show the same spirit to them. 'When you give a dinner or a supper, do not ask your friends, your brothers, your relatives, nor rich neighbours, lest they also invite you back, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you; for you shall be repaid at the resurrection of the just' (Luke 14:12-14).

When Paul spoke for the last time to the church in Ephesus he said, 'I have shown you in every way, by labouring like this that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus that he said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive"' (Acts 20:35).

Does that not stand the world's wisdom on its head! We may take a long time to learn it, but learn it we must. 'Give, and it shall be given unto you' (Luke 6:38).

Conclusion

Those who love most know God best. That love did not arise naturally, it is the work of his Spirit and it results from knowing his love for them.

This Spirit of love cannot come from the heart of someone who does not know God. It cannot buy God's favour, nor does anyone make the attempt. For buying a person's favour is an attempt to gain some benefit for ourselves, it is not love.

When Judas complained about Mary 'wasting' her possessions it sounded pious, but in reality he had no care for the poor, only for himself. We should not be upset if we are criticised for our worship of Christ, for our critics are not all they seem.

We often underestimate God's love. That happens when we are conscious of sin either in ourselves or others and we imagine God will not show mercy.

God, who is rich in mercy, is able to provide for those who serve him either by their worship or their care for his poor. And there will be a resurrection when all these things will become public and acknowledge his servants before his Father and the holy angels.