

Sunday 13th March
Mark 14:1-26
Jesus' death symbolised

We continue with our series in Mark's Gospel, and thank you to Drew for his helpful treatment last week of an often-misunderstood passage. A reminder, we're asking ourselves two key questions: Jesus' *personal* question, "Who do you say I am?"; and the natural follow up question, "What difference does who he is make to your life?" Today we read from Mark 14:1-26.

[Read Mark 14:1-26]

1 Now the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were only two days away, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were looking for some sly way to arrest Jesus and kill him. *2* "But not during the Feast," they said, "or the people may riot."

3 While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head.

4 Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, "Why this waste of perfume? *5* It could have been sold for more than a year's wages and the money given to the poor." And they rebuked her harshly.

6 "Leave her alone," said Jesus. "Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. *7* The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. *8* She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. *9* Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."

10 Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them. *11* They were delighted to hear this and promised to give him money. So he watched for an opportunity to hand him over.

12 On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb, Jesus' disciples asked him, "Where do you want us to go and make preparations for you to eat the Passover?"

13 So he sent two of his disciples, telling them, "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him. *14* Say to the owner of the house he enters, 'The Teacher asks: where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' *15* He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there."

16 The disciples left, went into the city and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover.

17 When evening came, Jesus arrived with the Twelve. *18* While they were reclining at the table eating, he said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me – one who is eating with me."

19 They were saddened, and one by one they said to him, "Surely not I?"

20 "It is one of the Twelve," he replied, "one who dips *bread* into the bowl with me. *21* The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born."

22 While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take it; this is my body."

23 Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and they all drank from it.

24 "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many," he said to them. *25* "Truly I tell you, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God."

26 When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

[Pray]

Symbolism can be empty, cheap and easy – something quick that we do to appear on trend; or it can be deep, meaningful and pertinent – something that speaks a thousand words without the need to utter one. For instance, in the last couple of weeks, we've seen countless Ukrainian flags all over the place, just as previously we've seen many "Black Lives Matter" messages, and "Me Too" messages, and before that "Je Suis Charlie" messages. Such symbolism can, of course, express a beneficial message of solidarity with those who suffer.

But the real test of the sincerity of any symbolism is what else is done to back up the message. And the symbolic act of devotion performed by this unnamed woman was undoubtedly both *sincere* and very *costly*. She remains anonymous in Mark who prefers to focus on her act of devotion, though it is probable (despite a few minor differences) that John 12 records the same incident, in which case she was in fact Mary, the sister of Lazarus. Note, too, that yet again, it is a *woman* whom Jesus commends, just like with the poor widow we heard about last week. *Her* offering was tiny in monetary terms; this is sizeable; both are commended! This one bottle was worth more than a year's wages for the average unskilled labourer – that's the equivalent of £15-20,000 in today's money. Some have even suggested that this might have represented this woman's entire lifetimes!

So the disciples' question appears very reasonable: "Why this waste of perfume?" Think how many poor people could have been helped and fed from the proceeds of selling it! If you have to pour perfume on Jesus, why break the bottle and waste the *whole* contents, instead of just pouring out a little? Of course, John 12:6 tells us that it was Judas Iscariot who asked this question, and that his motive was very different from his words: "He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it."

Yet, whilst Mark suggests that this may have been the final catalyst for Judas deciding to betray Jesus, Mark's emphasis at this point is much more on the *meaning* of this *woman's* actions. It was an act of beautiful devotion to Jesus, but that is not its primary significance. Rather, remarkably, this woman recognised both Jesus' unique worthiness and that this was a unique moment in history. The poor would always be around, and Jesus encourages us to help them frequently. But a never-to-be-repeated, cosmos-changing moment was about to happen. The Son of God, God himself, was about to give his life for the salvation of the world! Maybe God had even revealed to this woman more than she could have understood naturally! But, even if she did not know the whole story, somehow she recognised that this moment must be marked.

Jesus, of course, absolutely knew the cross was coming and what it would achieve, and so he interpreted her actions within that context: "She poured perfume on my body beforehand *to prepare for my burial*." Oil was used to anoint important people to important roles – priest, king, prophet, etc. – but perfume was often used to anoint a body for burial. Sometimes the whole jar would be broken and placed inside the tomb with the dead person. Whether knowingly or not, this act symbolises what was about to happen.

It was an extravagant, costly offering of love and personal commitment. Yet it is nothing compared to Jesus' own far more extravagant, costly offering of even greater love and personal commitment to come. The jar was broken so that it could not be used again; Jesus' own *body* was broken in his death. This perfume was poured out in reckless extravagance; but it was nothing compared to the reckless extravagance of Jesus' blood being

poured out for our forgiveness and restoration to God! If this perfume appeared “wasted”, how much more would Jesus’ *life* appear wasted, as he gave it up in his prime?

Yet, the truth is this perfume was far from wasted; rather its purpose was to bestow on Jesus the honour he is due. And, even more, Jesus’ death was far from wasted; rather its purpose was to bestow on *us* an honour we are certainly *not* due – Jesus’ righteousness! What appeared to be the most terrible human travesty was actually the greatest victory ever won. For by it, Jesus won the decisive once-for-all victory of both God and humanity over the flesh, sin and death, the world, and the devil! As Colossians 2:15 says, “having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them *by the cross.*” ...

Back to our passage, and as time moved on, Jesus gave an even clearer symbol of his death to come, and commanded us to act out this symbol to remember him. The high threat level from the Jewish leaders’ plots was raised still further by Judas’ agreement to betray Jesus. And in that context, Jesus shared a Passover Feast with his disciples – the celebration of Israel’s liberation from slavery in Egypt by the mighty hand of God, which was appropriated to themselves by each participant in the meal as the beneficiaries of their ancestor’s liberation. This was the biggest celebration meal of the whole Jewish calendar, and the whole event of the Exodus, as well as the Passover meal that celebrated it, foreshadowed the liberation that Jesus would bring in far greater measure. For the liberation *he* brings is internal, not external – it frees us from that which wars against our own *souls*, not just our bodies, namely sin! This is itself foreshadowed in the removal of yeast from the house before the Passover Feast – yeast in both Old and New Testaments is often a symbol of sin or evil.

But not long into the meal, Jesus introduced a highly sombre note into the celebration: “Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.” Again, Jesus may have built upon an allusion that was already contained in the Passover Feast. The word “bread” is for some reason inserted into our English translations here, where the original Greek just talks of “dipping into the bowl.” Some Jewish commentators maintain that it was more likely to be a ritual called “karpas,” during which green vegetables were dipped into red wine vinegar. The meaning of this ritual is not *certain*, but it may have symbolised the dipping of the hyssop plant into the Passover Lamb’s blood in order to paint it on the doorframes to ward off the Angel of Death, and / or it may have symbolised Joseph’s brothers selling him into slavery and dipping his coat into goat’s blood to cover their betrayal – the event which ultimately led to the Israelites going to Egypt in the first place. If the latter, then Jesus’ prediction of his own betrayal must have struck a chord. Yet, despite his sober warning of the consequences of such a betrayal, Judas’ heart remained hard, as Pharaoh’s had many centuries earlier. Though Jesus’ death was God’s plan for our salvation, yet Judas remained culpable for the callousness of his own heart in his betrayal – it is an example of how God’s predestination and our free will are both somehow genuine!

Later in the Feast, Jesus took the unleavened Matzah bread and broke it, saying, “Take it; this is *my* body.” This was called “The bread of affliction.” It reminded the Israelites of the haste with which they had to leave Egypt to escape Pharaoh’s army. And “affliction” is certainly an apt description of what Jesus would face on the cross. But there is another interesting ritual that may have already been part of the Passover meal that Jesus celebrated, or may have been instigated by Jesus’ actions here, and then a little later adopted by all Jews into their celebration of the Passover (indeed, it is still practised today). There are in fact three pieces of Matzah placed within one pouch. The *middle* piece of the three is taken out, broken, and then wrapped in a cloth and hidden to be found and consumed later in the ceremony. Again, Jewish Christians see the three matzahs in one pouch as symbolic of the truth that God is Three-in-One, and the breaking, hiding and revealing of the *middle*

matzah as symbolic of Jesus' body broken on the cross, wrapped in cloths and hidden in the tomb, then resurrected three days later. It's a powerful image!

Lastly, Jesus took the shared cup of wine, the third of four drunk during the Passover – this one just at the end of the meal. The wine, not surprisingly, symbolised the blood of the animals by which God made his *covenant* of love with the Jewish people. According to rabbinic tradition, the four cups represent the four promises in Exodus 6:6-7: "I will bring you out"; "I will deliver you"; "I will redeem you"; "I will take you to be my people." So, this was the Cup of Redemption, also sometimes called the Cup of Thanksgiving.

What is shocking is what Jesus says about it: "This is *my* blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many." Every Jew knew that their covenant with God was both symbolised and maintained by his provision of the blood of animal sacrifices. These were made in place of the shedding of human blood which is the just punishment for sin, just as the blood of the Passover Lamb had protected the firstborn children of Israel from the Angel of Death. This was the means of their redemption (of buying out of slavery) both in history and now. Yet, Jesus was claiming that there was a new and better means of redemption – of buying out of slavery to sin – and that was through his shed blood! "This is *my* blood of the covenant." A new covenant in him.

And it wasn't only for Jews. Rather it was for "many." In the New Testament "many" can be interchangeable for "all," and this is the case here: Jesus' blood was shed for all – literally everyone who has ever lived before or after his death. He died to bear all the sin of every person. But some don't let him bear their sin – they insist on keeping hold of it themselves by refusing to put their trust in him – how that must break his heart, and yet he gives us the freewill to accept or to reject him. In these powerful symbols we see dramatized before us the agony that Jesus endured to bring us to his Father. We have the choice to partake or not, but Jesus longs for us to come, to lay down our sins, and to thank him for bearing them on that wooden cross, and to take up our cross daily to follow him. The table is spread for a feast. Will you come and appropriate to yourself, afresh or for the first time, his great victory of redemption through his broken body and shed blood?

[Pray]

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