

JOHN CHAPTER 12 – THE EXTRAVAGANCE OF MARY

This will be the fifth talk in our series on discipleship and up to this point we have looked at some very searching passages focusing upon teaching from Jesus around issues of counting the cost, obedience, sacrifice, servant hood and suffering as part of our calling to follow Him. Personally I have found it very challenging and have benefited from discussing what this all means in practice in my small group and I really hope it is making a difference to us all as we work through together what it means to live daily as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

For the next five talks we will be in John's gospel – today in Chapter 12 and following this our focus will be upon the teaching Jesus gave His disciples the night before going to the cross – teaching that should continue to challenge any complacency and compromise in our response to the call of Jesus to "Follow Me"

Please turn to John Chapter 12 – page 1019.

I want us to learn from the actions and attitude of a female disciple of Jesus that was very much open to misunderstanding and misinterpretation for those who were there and watching – my hope and aim is for us to interpret and understand it properly such that what she did then will stir our hearts and impact our attitude and actions now.

It was an act of courage; it was extravagant, generous, and costly and directed towards Jesus himself. Before we read about it I want to share about another true story of costly, courageous generosity that I heard last week.

Last Sunday night the BBC showed a programme to mark Holocaust Memorial Day about a remarkable woman called Henia Bryer – now 86 – who survived four Nazi Concentration Camps during the Second World War. Did anyone else see it?

It was called "Prisoner Number A26188" – a number she still has tattooed on her wrist as a reminder of her past. She actually chose not to speak about her experiences for many years after the war but then realised people were forgetting - or even denying - what had happened – so she was now willing to tell her story in detail in front of a camera.

The documentary also featured interviews with her children and grand children and the effect of her experiences upon them.

One of her sons shared how one time as a teenager on his birthday, when he didn't seem too overjoyed with a particular present, his mother told him that the most precious birthday present she ever received was a slice of stale bread. The story behind it was this.

In Auschwitz on her 17th birthday – separated from all her family – she had a best friend who disappeared very early in the morning. Henia was annoyed that her friend had left without saying anything on that particular day – but when she returned later in the evening she realised why. Her friend had gone to work all day in one of the labour wings – her reward being a slice of stale bread which she promptly presented to her best friend as a birthday present.

It was a present that the now 86 year old Henia had never forgotten – and neither had her son who declared that the act had had a profound effect on him in terms of understanding the power of those acts that are generous and extravagant and sacrificial towards others.

There is something similar going on in the passage we are going to focus upon. It tells of an act of sacrificial generosity that has been remembered and that has resonated down to us now and which we need to reflect upon – particularly in terms of applying it to being a disciple of Jesus Christ.

We will look at the passage in bite sized chunks starting with the first two verses
(Read verses 1, 2)

Let us first put what was happening into context.

The Place was Bethany – about a days walk from Jerusalem and Jesus was in the home of Lazarus, Martha and Mary where there was a celebration meal. What was the cause of celebration?

The answer is in the previous Chapter where we have a detailed account of the raising of Lazarus – the most remarkable and the most public of all the miracles of Jesus. Lazarus had been dead in the tomb for four days before walking out at the command of Jesus.

We are told that the purpose of the miracle was so those who were there would see the glory of God and believe that Jesus was from God.

Lazarus effectively became a walking visual aid of the majesty and power of the Lord Jesus Christ and at the outset of chapter 12 we read he was reclining at the table with Jesus enjoying the food being served by his sister Martha.

We then read that during the celebrations there was a rather dramatic incident involving Mary - the sister of Lazarus and Martha.

(Read verse 3)

It was a humble act, a courageous act and a costly act.

Humble because it was the role of a servant or slave in a household to wash the feet of a guest. The host would anoint the guest's head with oil - but the feet were left for someone at the bottom of the social order.

It was courageous because she risked criticism and misunderstanding from others. Culturally a "respectable" woman did not unbind her hair in public and then wipe someone's feet. It was actually socially shocking behaviour - and Mary was making herself very vulnerable in taking such action. It was also financially costly for she poured out half a litre - about a pint - of what is described as "expensive perfume".

I know nothing about perfume - except it is very expensive - even for what seems to me to be a tiny bottle!

I also know eau de toilette is cheaper - but doesn't have the same effect and impact when given as a gift.

Here we have a whole pint of very expensive perfume poured out on the feet of Jesus!

Why was Mary doing this?

Surely it was a remarkable outpouring of gratitude to Jesus on her part. Lazarus was her brother whom she loved - so this was her way of expressing her thankfulness to what Jesus had done in raising him from the dead.

Try and imagine you were actually there in the room.

I imagine the noise of celebration suddenly ceasing while the smell of the fragrance of the perfume grew stronger.

I imagine that there was silence while all this was going on such was the shock of what Mary was doing.

The silence was then broken by someone who was very aware - and also agitated - about the financial cost of Mary's actions.

(READ VERSES 4 -6)

Judas does ask a very good question.

"Why wasn't the perfume sold and the money given to the poor"? After all -as he points out - it was worth a year's wages. If we put this into our time and context and we go somewhere between the minimum wage and the average wage in our country we are talking about £15000 - that is a lot of money.

(If you don't think it is talk to our treasurer afterwards).

As some one I read put it "Mary poured out 15 grand's worth in 15 minutes".

Is that not just wasteful and reckless?

Is that not what you would be thinking if you would have been in the room on that day? (I think I would have!)

It was a good question then - and it is a good question now.

As a Church we have to be public about how we spend our money as we are open to scrutiny and need to justify how and why we spend what we do.

One reason for this is that Jesus was poor - he practiced what he preached - He was not tainted in anyway by the love of money and power - this is just one of the things that is attractive about Him. Shouldn't any Church - or Christian organisation or movement - reflect the person they claim to believe in and serve?

Of course - and how we work that out in practice when it comes to spending money is a challenge we must treat seriously and with transparency.

It was a good question - but asked by someone who had the wrong motive!

Look again at verse 6 - what a devastating remark!

John reveals that Judas was a thief - he was upset that the perfume wasn't sold not because of the needs of the poor but rather because of his own greed. As the keeper of the money bag he liked to take a cut of what was put in it.

It was clear that Judas knew how much things in the world were worth.

He was the type of guy who could say within £500 how much your car was worth - or - maybe more relevantly - within £20 as to the value of your bike.

But he seemed to have a flaw in his character - he was after things for himself and was interested in this life only.

One indicator of that was his love of money. It is striking that just one week on from this incident Judas would betray Jesus for 30 pieces of silver.

He stands as a warning to us - not least because, even though he was one of the disciples of Jesus, he

remained focused just on the here and now and primarily on what he could get for himself. Let's not be too quick to shake our head now and condemn him - but rather to search our own hearts when it comes to our own attitude to money.

But our main focus from this passage is not to be on Judas but Mary. What can we learn and take from her heart attitude as to how we live out - and practically express - being a disciple of Jesus?

How was Jesus going to respond to what Mary had just done?

How was he going to respond to the question from Judas about the money being better given to the poor?

Who would He stand with and affirm and why?

READ VERSES 7 – 8.

“Leave her alone” Jesus said.

What did he see in Mary that everyone else in the room seems to have missed?

To answer the question from Judas He says something that is easy to misunderstand and to misinterpret – which is:

“You will always have the poor among you”

Does that mean there is no point in helping them - for they will always be there?

He did not mean this!

We need to understand that Jesus here – as is often the case – is quoting Scripture –and that sets the context and meaning as to what He is saying.

It is from Deuteronomy Chapter 15 and is worth reading:

Deuteronomy 15 – verses 7 -11 (Page 185 – and put it up on screen)

Can you see the context of what Jesus quotes?

Because the poor are always there we need to be consistent in our open handed giving and generosity. We know that was both the teaching of Jesus and his practice with the disciples.

So when Jesus says this it did not mean “Well the poor don't really matter” – that would be a totally wrong interpretation and misunderstanding.

So how are we to understand what Jesus is saying?

The key is in verse 7:

“It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial”

Why is Jesus – in the middle of a celebration – suddenly talking about his death?

It was because He knew it was now very close.

Jesus had actually been preparing His disciples for His death – referring to it more and more frequently as he approached this point. It was like a drumbeat that was getting louder and louder.

Chapter 10 verse 11 – “I am the Good Shepherd and the Good Shepherd lays down his life for His Sheep”

Chapter 10 verse 17 – “The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life – only to take it up again. No one takes it from me – but I lay it down of my own accord”

Then in Chapter 11 Jesus confronts death itself and shows his authority over it by raising Lazarus – but also talks about his own death and resurrection.

After the raising of Lazarus we read that there is a clear plan from the Sanhedrin to kill Jesus because so many were turning to him.

Knowing this - why didn't Jesus get as far away as possible?

Why enter into Jerusalem – as he does next - knowing all the opposition that awaited him there?

Jesus can see His Cross and burial are on the near horizon – the one who had the power over death was actually going to surrender to death.

John gives us an important detail when he wrote this – the first sentence of Chapter 12:

“Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany”

This is significant because the Passover lamb – the sacrificial lamb – the deliverer of His people – is about to go to His death.

The timing of his willing sacrifice was always going to be the Passover because of all it symbolised.

So can you see what is happening – the drum beat is getting louder and louder.

Some seemed to spot it – others not at all.

What of Mary – did she spot it?

I think so. Was this not the reason that she is responding so dramatically, so passionately, in such a costly way – not only because of her brother Lazarus - but because she understands where Jesus is heading.

This is an encounter that is recorded for us now not teach us how we should treat the poor – it is not about how we should spend our money. There are plenty of other passages around these things – but this is not one of them.

This is about the person of Christ himself, about the Cross and the sacrifice that he made. It is about recognising Him as the Passover Lamb and the Resurrection and the Life - and about our response to all of this as His disciple.

What is at the heart of being a disciple of Jesus Christ?

Go back to the first talk in our series when Jesus called the first disciples – remember what he said: “Come – leave what you are doing and follow me”.

Being a disciple is primarily being in a living relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ – allowing Him to lead and guide us and change our hearts and renew our thinking, attitudes and action.

Why did Mary pour all that expensive perfume over the feet of Jesus?

Some in the room misunderstood what it meant – but not Jesus.

He knew her response was something extravagant in order to express her love and gratitude to Christ.

How would you describe Mary’s response?

Here are some words I would use:

UNRESERVED, UNHINDERED, COSTLY, SACRIFICIAL, WHOLEHEARTED and EXTRAVAGANT.

In any relationship you have with someone you love - don’t you occasionally do something that is extravagant?

Think of someone you love – then think of something you have done that has expressed that love. Was it, for you at least, something extravagant and costly to some measure?

If it involved a financial cost and someone found out and then said to you:

“You could have given the money to the Growth night shelter – worth at least five evening meals” – how would you respond?

I think you would at least say – or think:

“You have missed the point – you have misunderstood what is going on here”.

This is about being extravagant in my relationship with someone I love – and love for someone always involves willingly paying a cost and being sacrificial in order to express that love does it not?

This is why Mary is a challenge to us all this morning as we continue to think through and apply what being a disciple is about and what it practically entails.

Have we fully grasped what Jesus went through and sacrificed for us to the point that our response is one of being practically, and extravagantly, grateful?

Mary should speak to and challenge all who claim they are a disciple of Jesus Christ.

One commentator I read described this act as “a typical woman’s gesture”. If that comment – made by a male is true – then it is shame on men. No – this is rather – or should be – a typical gesture from someone who has grasped God’s love, mercy and grace to us through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Mary’s love for Christ here was shown in a powerful, dramatic and extravagant way. It was in no way wasteful in the context she was in – at the feet of Jesus just one week before His death.

We need to be constantly be thinking and considering just how we practically express our love for Christ in the daily situations we find ourselves in.

I have been challenged by Mary afresh in preparing this.

I suppose one way is not allowing anything – even giving to the poor and needy – to actually become a substitute for knowing and following Jesus personally - but allowing my response to others to flow from the example Jesus gave.

Everything we receive from that relationship – the blessings both spiritual and material – is to be shared with others.

It begins with what has been given to us through His sacrifice on the Cross.
It means we are to express the love, mercy grace and forgiveness that we have received from Christ in our relationships one with each other.

Mary – unreserved, uninhibited, wholehearted, sacrificial, extravagant in her response to what Jesus had done for her.

She is a wonderful example of discipleship for us all to reflect upon.

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR SMALL GROUPS

1. We are not told in the account the reason why Mary poured the perfume over the feet of Jesus in such a dramatic and extravagant way (This is a very different scenario from the woman who did a similar thing to Jesus in Luke Chapter 7)
Why do you think Mary did what she did?
2. Imagine you were in the room enjoying the celebration meal.
What would you have thought and felt as you witnessed Mary's outpouring of the perfume over the feet of Jesus?
3. Judas speaks up and points out the value of the perfume (a year's wages) and suggests that the money could have instead been given to the poor.
Would you have agreed – indeed supported - his rebuke to Mary?
If so, why?
4. Jesus rebukes Judas and defends and honours what Mary has done – why?
What do you think He recognised about Mary's actions that no one else did?
5. Would you agree that this passage is not about how we treat the poor or how we should or shouldn't spend our money?
In the context of our series on discipleship, what can we learn from Mary and her response to Jesus?
What, if any, are the practical lessons for us to reflect and act upon?