

## JOURNEYING THROUGH HOLY WEEK TO EASTER WITH MARK'S GOSPEL

**WEDNESDAY 31 March 2021**

Focus your attention on God and become aware again of God's presence with you, and of joining with other worshippers (as in the Introduction to this series).

Thank God for bringing you safely to this day. Ask God to inspire you.

Then read this passage, paying attention to it as you do. What catches your imagination? What puzzles you? How does it make you feel?

### **Mark 14:1-11 (NRSV)**

<sup>14</sup>It was two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him; <sup>2</sup>for they said, 'Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people.'

<sup>3</sup>While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. <sup>4</sup>But some were there who said to one another in anger, 'Why was the ointment wasted in this way? <sup>5</sup>For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.' And they scolded her. <sup>6</sup>But Jesus said, 'Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. <sup>7</sup>For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. <sup>8</sup>She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. <sup>9</sup>Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.'

<sup>10</sup>Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. <sup>11</sup>When they heard it, they were greatly pleased, and promised to give him money. So he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.

### **Reflection**

This must have been a troubling story at the time. It perhaps still is. We have three different versions of it, in Mark (who is closely followed by Matthew), in Luke and in John. It is as if each is trying to make sense of it for themselves.

At the start of this version in Mark, Jesus has become such a challenge to the Temple and the power of the Jewish authorities that they are looking for ways of getting rid of him; but they want to do it quietly without a fuss, not in the public glare of the festival [Mark 14:1-2]. At the end of this passage, Judas has gone to them to agree to find ways of achieving what they want [Mark 14:10-11].

In between we have a story which seems to be implying that this is what gave Judas the excuse, and tipped him over into betrayal. Jesus is dining in the house of Simon the Leper. He is once again with the outcasts rather than with the religious, 'proper' people. Simon may have been a healed leper (we do not know), but he would still have been socially suspect. Jesus is certainly not avoiding his company. Scandal!

Then a woman comes in, apparently unchaperoned and unaccompanied. She enters a meal at which men are dining, and does so apparently uninvited and unannounced. More scandal! Even worse, she breaks open a jar of extremely expensive ointment. If it is indeed worth over three hundred denarii as some of Jesus's disciples suggested, it would take more than a labourer's wages for a year to buy it.

Then she pours it on Jesus's head. Like the widow putting all she has in the temple treasury, she acts extravagantly. In her case, though, there is no religious system forcing her to do it. In fact, the Old Testament law would urge people not to do this but to care for the vulnerable and give to the poor. Jesus would seem to have lived austere in the spirit of that. So why has this woman not done it? Why this waste?

Jesus steps into the argument. He first of all makes plain that he is not countermanding the spirit of the Old Testament. Caring for the poor is an ongoing responsibility for all of us, in every age – including ours! [Mark 14:6-7]. But it is not a case of "either/or". On this occasion something else is in play that is equally important. This woman has acted as if what he has been saying about being handed over to death and raised to life is actually true. She has not just assented to it, she has got involved and acted on it. She has taken the chance to anoint his body for burial even before he has died. Perhaps she had an inkling that they would not be allowed or able to do it in the chaos after his death (as eventually happened [Mark 15:42-16:2]).

Whereas the male disciples have appeared strong and promised much, but have started to fail time and time again, in the latter chapters of Mark's gospel the women promise nothing but become stronger and stronger. This woman is one of the most important.

There may be something else going on as well. In Mark's Gospel, spiritual things are often embodied in practical things of flesh and blood. We are not told how Jesus is tempted in Mark 1:12-13, but in Mark 8:33 Jesus rebukes Peter as Satan because Peter has tempted him to be God's Son but not in God's way. The heavens are torn open at the baptism of Jesus, and on the Mount of Transfiguration, and at 15:38 the Temple curtain is torn apart. On the first two occasions God's voice declares that Jesus is God's son. At 15:39 the soldier who has just crucified him declares it. At his baptism, the Spirit descends and anoints Jesus. "Christ" and "Messiah" both mean anointed. Kings were anointed, and so were priests.

This may be what tips Judas over the edge. In our passage, the woman anoints Jesus. She really gets what it is all about! The question is, do we? And if we do, what are we going to do about it?

### **Prayer**

Lord, in your goodness,  
open our eyes to your light,  
and so fill our hearts with your love  
that we may always see and acknowledge Jesus as our anointed saviour,  
and act on his word in sincerity and truth.  
We make our prayer  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

*Methodist Worship Book p. 556*

### **The Lord's Prayer**