

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast Date: 18 August 2002

No. T0227

Speaker: Mr. Jonathan Hughes

Four New Testament Suppers: The Supper at Bethany - John 12

One of the bedtime stories that both my son and I like is called "*Guess how much I love you*". It is the story of how a little hare tries to find different ways to tell a bigger hare how much he loves him, only to find that the big hare loves him more. I like it because it is short and means that peace comes that bit sooner! My son likes it, I guess, because instinctively children recognise that some things, like telling those you love how much you love them, are the right things to do. As we continue our look at special suppers in the Bible, we will see that Mary also had this quality. What she did for Jesus defies rational explanation, but instinctively she knew it to be right. Before we read about today's supper, it should be noted that Jesus was twice anointed by a lady called Mary, and the two instances should not be confused. In Luke 7, a "sinful woman" anoints Jesus, in repentance, in the house of Simon the Pharisee. Here, in John 12, Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, anoints Jesus in worship. A similar account can be found in Matthew 26:6-13, and in Mark 14:3-9. We will from time to time refer to these two individual accounts, but let us now read the story from John 12:1-8.

Then, six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was who had been dead, whom He had raised from the dead. There they made Him a supper; and Martha served, but Lazarus was one of those who sat at the table with Him. Then Mary took a pound of very costly oil of spikenard, anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil. Then one of His disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, who would betray Him, said, "Why was this fragrant oil not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" This he said, not that he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief, and had the money box; and he used to take what was put in it. Then Jesus said, "Let her alone; she has kept this for the day of My burial. For the poor you have with you always, but Me you do not have always."

Having triumphantly entered Jerusalem, Jesus presented Himself as the Messiah. He then retired to Bethany six days before the Passover. Now, two days before the Passover, Jesus attends a meal held in His honour. Assuming Jesus was crucified on a Friday, the events of this supper took place on the Wednesday evening. To those around Him, Jesus was riding on the crest of a wave of popularity. Not only had He been rapturously received in Jerusalem, but also here in His presence was incontrovertible proof of His majesty and power. At the meal with Him was Lazarus, who had been dead, but was now very much alive. It is not clear who Simon the leper was, and whether he bore any relation to this special family of Lazarus and his two sisters. Some have suggested that, as a leper whom Jesus had healed, he had a house built to commemorate the healing for use as a "community centre". As such, then, this meal may well have been a very large and public affair. Bethany was indeed honoured to have two celebrities together. What else might happen? Perhaps the meal was to mark the raising of Lazarus. Martha and Mary wanted to do something to honour the Lord Jesus. A memorial service would be altogether out of keeping, too mystical by far. This brother of theirs was very much alive, returned to his earthly friends and his earthly business. No, a meal would be a suitable occasion to mark this earthly blessing. The whole focus then, at this meal, was on what had happened already, the earthly triumphs that had gone before.

Often we like to label characters by a particular feature that marked them out. So we speak of doubting Thomas, or brave Daniel. Perhaps we should speak of mindreading Mary. Mary was a woman of very few words, but she instinctively knows what is right for the occasion. In this chapter she says nothing, yet achieves more than a thousand pulpit preachers or worship leaders will ever do. There is a lesson for all of us in this! Whilst those around her focused on the earthly glories of the Lord, Mary read the thoughts of Jesus, the secrets in His heart, and moved to meet these. George Matheson has written concerning this meal "She turned aside from her own joy to read the thoughts of Jesus. She heard Him saying in His heart, "The unburying of your brother will be a burial to Me"; and there came into her mind the memory of His antagonism to death." You see, in the previous chapter we read that Mary had been given a unique insight into the heart of the Saviour. After Lazarus had died, Jesus eventually comes to Bethany, just at the right time. When Mary came to meet Jesus she said to Him "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died." Wonderful, simple faith! Then, in John 11:33, we read "Therefore, when Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her weeping, He groaned in the spirit and was troubled." The words "groaned in the spirit" could literally be translated, "He breathed indignation". At what was Jesus indignant? At the fact that death was in the world at all. It had no place there; it was never a part of God's creation. It spoilt the perfection of what God had pronounced as very good. Its senseless, mindless destruction was anathema to a creatorial God. Those of you who have felt the sharp pain of death, who perhaps even today suffer bereavement, will in a small measure feel something of what

passed through the heart of the Lord Jesus that day. Death had no business in His presence, no place in the world He had made. Quite simply death ought not to be.

And yet its shadow hung over the heart of the Lord at this meal. Others would celebrate the resurrection of Lazarus, glory in Jesus' triumphant entry to Jerusalem, yet Jesus alone knew that in the space of a few short hours, He would die. That sense of indignation held His heart. Yet He was not alone. One other at this feast read those silent thoughts. And Mary resolved to do what she could to pour healing oil upon those troubled waters.

The act of worship that Mary performs, in its two parts, is highly symbolic. Firstly, we read that she "took a pound of very costly oil of spikenard, and anointed the feet of Jesus". Matthew tells us that Mary anointed His head, as does Mark, who also adds the fact that Mary broke the jar the oil was in before anointing Jesus. Let us return to the words of Matheson, as we consider what Mary was saying, in this wordless act. "It is the image of outward death and of inward immortality. The box is shattered; but with the shattering the fragrance only begins. While it was whole its perfume was confined; but the breaking gave it wings – it filled all the house. The act told Jesus He would never really be buried, and it told Him truly. It said that His fragrance would come from His shatteredness that the perfume would spread widest where He had touched the common lot of humanity." She gently reminds Him of His own words in John 12:24, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless an ear of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much fruit." How beautiful the aroma of Jesus' death was to prove to God the Father, and how vital for us, our only means of salvation.

But, we might ask ourselves, why did Mary break the box, apart from the powerful symbol it revealed? In breaking the box she removed herself from the temptation of holding back. If she had just poured it from the jar, then there may have been the temptation to hold a little back, to keep some for another occasion. No, Mary would withhold nothing from this sacrifice. It was all or nothing, and she resolved to give Jesus her all. In the words of the children's chorus:

*"All that I have, all that I have,
I will give Jesus all that I have."*

It is Mark alone who tells us that Mary broke the jar, and this is entirely in keeping with the character of his gospel. Throughout Mark, Jesus is portrayed as God's perfect servant. Well, one of the first lessons we need to learn if we are to serve Him is our own brokenness. We live in a society that praises self assertiveness, self-made men. But there is no room for my abilities in God's work. For sure He will use our talents, but unless it is done under His direction, with His help, it is futile. Before God can use us, we need to learn the hard truth that Paul explains in Romans 7:18: "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells". Once I come to the point of realising that everything I do in my own strength only impedes His work, then He is able to use me, for it is His work.

Matthew tells us that Mary anointed Jesus' head. It is right that in the Gospel that describes Jesus as the King, it is His head that is anointed. This was how kings had always been chosen (see 1 Samuel 10:1). But Mary realises that Jesus is more than any ordinary king. So John, who presents Jesus as the Son of God in his Gospel, tells us that Mary anointed Jesus' feet. She was unworthy to stand before Him, so she falls at His feet, and anoints them instead. No doubt the oil covered Him from head to foot. The whole person of the Lord Jesus was special to Mary. One advertising slogan runs "because you're worth it!" Well, in Mary's estimation Jesus was worth it, and deserved all that she could give.

Until then she had been involved with Jesus; now she commits herself unreservedly to Him. What difference is there between involvement with Him and commitment to Him. Perhaps you are involved with Jesus, but are you committed to Him? It has been said that it is like a cooked breakfast! The hen is involved but the pig is committed. The hen gives something to the breakfast, but the pig has to die to provide the bacon!

Until this point, Mary could have gone away and others would have talked about her glowingly. How generous! How moving a tribute! She had given Jesus something very valuable; now she gives Him herself! Having anointed Jesus' feet with perfume, Mary takes her hair and wipes His feet dry.

Mary lived in a society that viewed a woman's hair as her glory. In wiping Jesus' feet with her hair, Mary was totally humbling herself. She knew that Jesus was soon to humble Himself, to make Himself obedient to death, even death on a cross! So she says to Jesus by her actions that she too will humble herself and identify herself completely with Him. One can only imagine what went through Jesus' mind as He hung upon the cross, made a curse for the whole world, but I wonder if the actions of Mary encouraged Him, that He was not wholly alone. What Mary does must rank amongst the most courageous acts recorded in the Bible. As David went down into the valley to meet Goliath, or as Daniel was lowered into the den of lions, what was the worst that could happen? Well they would die a martyr's death and it would all be over. Mary faced, and she knew it, a lifetime of humiliation. Every time she went to the market, or to the synagogue, each time she stepped out of her front door, she knew there would be watching eyes, sniggering voices. "There she goes! What is she going to do today?" Mary would always be the woman who had humiliated

herself in front of her family, her friends and neighbours, in front of the whole town. And yet, having counted the cost, she still wipes Jesus' feet with her hair. When I consider how embarrassed people are about singing hymns loudly in church, or just saying that they are a Christian, then the enormity of the sacrifice Mary makes begins to assume its full value.

And yet here, even here, cold carping voices are heard. Like a bowl of cold water thrown upon the warmth of Mary's sacrifice, Judas complains, "Why was this fragrant oil not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" Utterly failing to appreciate the greater worth of Mary humbling herself, Judas falls back on what he does understand, money. Were two hearts ever so utterly at odds in the presence of the Lord? One so full of Christ, the other so full of material gain for self. We live in a world and in a generation where devotion to Christ will inevitably lead to loneliness. The more I am committed to Him, the more I will find myself alone, even in the largest congregation. Judas raises the question that probably hovered on many lips. But it brings to light just how much Mary had done. Three hundred denarii was nearly a year's wages. Some have suggested that this perfume had been given to her as her dowry. If this is so, then in giving it to Jesus, Mary was significantly reducing her hopes of marriage, of children, or worldly position. Nearly a year's wages! I have never given anything like that and, quite frankly, I can hardly imagine ever saying goodbye to that sort of money. It is a staggering gift of generosity, tens of thousands of pounds in today's money, poured out, given forever. When Paul says in 2 Corinthians 9:7 "God loves a cheerful giver" the word used for cheerful can also be translated hilarious! I guess many in that room laughed at Mary, but Jesus valued fully what had been given to Him. Mary, who had learned to sow bountifully, to let go of what she could not keep, would reap a bountiful reward, for there can be few commendations greater than that given to Mary.

Jesus says to Judas, and to the other silent mockers, "Leave her alone...she has done what she could." Can the same be said of each one of us? Jesus does not expect us to do what we cannot do. So often we have dreams about what we would like to do for God, if only I had the money, or the support, or...So often our dreams remain just that. But the kingdom of God is not furthered by dreams. Souls are saved, strugglers helped, students taught, by people doing what they can. I know in my own life, too, that I could always do that bit more. Yes, we are all busy, but if we are honest with ourselves then there are always ways in which we could all do a bit more for Jesus. We could all give a little more generously, or sacrifice a little more time. There are always so many little things we could do, things that would hardly be noticed by others, a quiet thank you to the preacher, a bunch of flowers to the housewife, a Hoovering of the church floor. Am I really doing what I can? Excuses come so easily. I wonder how many flooded through the mind of Mary as she came with her perfume. But as well as doing what she could, Mary did it when she could! As we said earlier on, the events of which we have been thinking took place on the evening before Jesus was betrayed. Mary might have thought to herself that there was no hurry. After all, Jesus had been to Bethany so many times before, had perhaps been staying there all week. Why not wait to find a less public occasion? This supper was for Lazarus. Surely she could not take the limelight away from him. How wonderful the heart of Mary, steadfast, ready for service now. If she had postponed for just 24 hours she would never have done what she did, and Jesus would have gone to the cross alone, un comforted. No, Mary did what she could, when she could. We, too, ought to be similarly motivated. There is a day coming, soon, when Jesus will come again. Then all opportunities to serve, to sacrifice, and to suffer, will have passed away for all eternity. All those things we had planned to do for Jesus, those people to tell, those prayers of praise, will forever remain undone. We spend so long wishing for the good old days, or looking forward to better times, that we miss the time and opportunity that God has given us now just to live for Him. Oh, let us be like Mary and do what we can do and do it today. Even one day may be too late.

Just as Jesus promised, what Mary did that evening at supper has remained as a memorial to her, to her generosity, to her courage and to her ability to feel what was in the heart of the Lord Jesus. So 2,000 years later we are thinking about her today. We may never have the honour of being talked about in generations to come, and across the continents, but just as surely we can be assured that all that we do for Him will be noted by Him and appreciated for all its cost.

Only last Sunday I heard the voice of a young child singing wholeheartedly along with the hymns. It touched my heart and made me realise just how much such simple giving must mean to the Lord Jesus. Then it made me ask myself what had I done for the heart of the Lord that day. What have I done for Jesus today?

Please Note:

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1. Large Print copies of this document are also available upon request.