

SUNDAY 7TH MARCH 2021 (3RD SUNDAY IN LENT)
WHY ARE WE HERE? TO GIVE AND NOT COUNT THE COST
MARK 14:1-11



WELCOME AND NOTICES

Open for Easter Day (4 April) for an 'in-person' service and then again on 18 April.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Jesus invites us to a way of celebration, meeting and feasting with the humble and poor.

Let us walk his way with joy.

Jesus beckons us to a way of risk, letting go of our security.

Let us walk his way with joy.

Jesus challenges us to listen to the voices of those who have nothing to lose.

Let us walk his way with joy.

Jesus calls us to follow the way of the cross, where despair is transformed by the promise of new life.

Let us walk his way with joy.

OPENING PRAYER AND CONFESSION

O God, we have come together to turn to you as your people. We come with Christians all over the world and across the centuries. We bring everything we are, all our gifts and talents, all that we do well and for good. We bring our weakness and our sorrow and every way in which we fail. We come in the hope and expectation that we shall find you here as we worship you, as the Scriptures are read and interpreted and as the music and words touch our spirits.

We pray that as we learn to follow Jesus, your Son, we may be saved from all that harms us, that we may become the people you made us to be and that we may find strength to do good in the world so that your will may be done.

God the Creator, we praise you.

God in Christ, we turn to you.

God the Comforter, we call upon you.

O God of justice, we have heard your commandments and they are a gift to us. Yet

we have failed to live by them. For this we are sorry and we turn to you for forgiveness. We have not loved you wholeheartedly. We have failed in love to our neighbours and to ourselves. We have not loved our enemies or blessed those who do us harm. We live in an unjust world, where many are hungry, and there is little peace.

Lord, have mercy upon us.

O God, your heart is full of mercy. May we heard your words to each of us: 'Your sins are forgiven.' May we forgive each other and forgive ourselves. **Amen.**

SONG: LORD, I COME TO YOU

https://youtu.be/H9_0jiO5ZRM

Lord, I come to you, let my heart be changed, renewed,

Flowing from the grace

that I've found in you.

And Lord I've come to know the weaknesses I see in me

Will be stripped away by the power of your love.

Hold me close, let your love surround me.

Bring me near, draw me to your side.

And as I wait I'll rise up like the eagle

And I will soar with you,

You Spirit leads me on in the power of your love.

Lord, unveil my eyes,

let me see you face to face,

The knowledge of your love

as you live in me.

Lord renew my mind as your will unfolds in my life,

In living every day by the power of your love.

SONG: JESUS, LOVER OF MY SOUL

https://youtu.be/MRiMT_0qiWw

Jesus, lover of my soul,

All consuming fire is in your gaze

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**Jesus, I want you to know
I will follow you all my days.
For no-one else in history is like you,
And history itself belongs to you.
Alpha and Omega, you have loved me,
And I will share eternity with you.**

**It's all about you, Jesus,
And all this is for you,
For your glory and your fame.
It's not about me,
As you should do things my way;
You alone are God,
And I surrender to your ways.**

READING: Mark 14:1-11

Now the Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread were only two days away, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were scheming to arrest Jesus secretly and kill him. ²'But not during the festival,' they said, 'or the people may riot.'

³While 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.

⁴Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, 'Why this waste of perfume?' ⁵It 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. ⁷The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. ⁸She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. ⁹Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.'

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

This is the Word of the Lord
Thanks be to God

REFLECTION: WHY ARE WE HERE? (3)
To give and not count the cost

Have you ever heard of a triptych? It is a three section painting. There are three scenes in this passage. As we know at this point in the gospel, the story is heading for the crucifixion. Jesus knows it; Judas and the chief priests plot it; the unnamed woman with the perfume prepares Jesus for it. Let's take a look at each scene.

1. SLY CHIEF PRIESTS

The first scene concerns the religious leaders. It was Passover time when everyone was remembering God's great act of liberation for his people. This was the setting Jesus chose for this final showdown with the Temple and its hierarchy. Up till now Jesus was acting not unlike Moses confronting Pharaoh to bring about freedom. But now it was time to face the Red Sea of Calvary, the point of no return. As far as the religious authorities were concerned, Passover was not a good time to arrest Jesus. They didn't want a riot at the festival! That's why they wanted to get rid of him by stealth. As Mark tells us '[they] were looking for some sly way to arrest Jesus and kill him' (v1). Our first scene – the sly chief priests.

I was struck by what is happening in Myanmar with the military unseating the elected government and cracking down on dissent. This week a news report said that the military and police were removing people at night, arresting those who dare to speak out against

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the military. A sneaky, sly way to arrest people, just like the chief priests of old.

There are times when we have to consider our own motives and take a check on whether we ourselves are being sly and sneaky. From the first scene I want to skip to the third scene before tackling the second.

2. JUDAS THE BETRAYER

The third and final scene here has Judas sneaking off to the chief priests with a promise of betrayal. They were delighted! An insider will deliver Jesus into their hands. They must have thought God was on their side. Mark doesn't tell us why Judas betrayed Jesus.

Was it disappointment in Jesus not being the kind of Messiah he had hoped for? Was it envy as Jesus attracted vast crowds and many followers? Was it pride, thinking he should be one of the closest apostles to Jesus? After all he held the money bag. He was the treasurer of the group. Did he think he was owed greater status? Or was it greed? John tells us that Judas 'was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put in it' (John 12:6). Judas cared more for money than the poor.

It is amazing that Judas, along with all the other disciples, seemingly still had no idea what was to come, despite Jesus telling them again and again on the road to Jerusalem (Mark 8:31; 9:9, 9:12; 10:33-4; 12:7-8). Or maybe Judas could see what was ahead and decided to make some money from it. Matthew tells us how much Judas was paid for his betrayal – 30 silver coins. What we do know is that Judas, having betrayed Jesus then watched for a good opportunity to hand him over.

3. EXTRAVAGANT WOMAN

Now back to the second scene, which I wanted to come to last, which concerns the woman

who was extravagant in her worship, giving without inhibition. We don't know the woman's name, at least neither Mark nor Matthew tells us. Luke simply says it was a sinful woman (Luke 7:37), but John tells us that the woman was in fact Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus (John 12:3). But the point of this is not who anointed Jesus but why she anointed him, and what it said about her and about him. She broke the jar and poured the perfume over his head (v3). John adds that she anointed Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. But whatever the description, the place would have filled with the fragrance. Imagine taking a large bottle of perfume and pouring over your head or on your feet. Imagine how the fragrance would linger for days.

This is an amazing moment. It was as an intense moment of pure devotion as one can imagine anywhere in Scripture. We can only presume she had given no thought of what others might think, otherwise she might have held back her devotion. All too often we hold back in devotion because of what we think others might think. That didn't happen here, but Mark tells us that some of those present 'rebuked her harshly' (v5). It always happens when people decide to worship Jesus without inhibition. Others looking on find it embarrassing, even distasteful. For those of us used to more formal church traditions, it is very easy to look down on those who are more informal in their worship. We may say, that's not for us. And of course, not everyone is called to pour precious perfume on Jesus' head but someone is, and the rest should respect that sort of extravagance.

The grumbles of the bystanders, who don't like seeing other people's emotions on display, are aimed at this woman. They suggest the ointment might have been sold and the money given to the poor. Judas was a man who knew the price of everything and the value of

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nothing. He instantly calculated the waste. In today's terms about £25,000. This would have made a great gift to help feed and clothe people. And it was customary to give gifts to the poor on the evening of Passover. This would have done very nicely. But the woman's critics didn't know her heart, for what she did was prophetic, in preparing Jesus for burial, even though she didn't know this.

In spite of all Jesus' teaching about the poor, here he makes his own imminent death the more important matter. He is trying to tell them something important, although they are not listening. This woman is preparing him for burial. Can't they see this? She has done it before his death rather than after he has been killed. Jesus is not suggesting the woman had prior knowledge of the events that would unfold, but the suggestion is she acted out of sheer fullness of heart. It was a 'beautiful thing' that she did (v6). Why does Jesus call it a beautiful thing?

Firstly because of her loving motive. 'Faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love' writes Paul (1 Cor. 13:13). Mary's beautiful gift came from a beautiful heart.

Secondly, the action came from a spontaneous response to the leading of the Holy Spirit. John Calvin wrote of this, 'she was guided by the breath of the Spirit that in sure confidence she could do this duty to Christ.' So often in life we are moved to do something beautiful but don't do it. We let 'common sense' prevail or the busyness of life overtake us.

Thirdly, this action was not done with practicality in mind. It was simply done for Jesus. Not everything in life needs to be practical. For example, music is not practical but can allow our spirit to soar.

Her action cut through male plotting on the one hand and male objections on the other.

Not for nothing is this woman held up as an example of a woman getting it right while all around her men are getting it wrong. Her actions bring us to question our own hearts before the Lord. Are we exuberant in devotion? Are we totally devoted to our Lord? Will we, in the words of St. Ignatius of Loyola, 'give and not count the cost'?

As I finish, I want to draw your attention to a lovely phrase in this passage, which I hope is an encouragement for you today. In v8 it says 'She did what she could.' There are times when we need to recognise we have done what we could and stop beating ourselves up over what we could not do. As long as we have done what we could, we are like the woman whose extravagance was commended by Jesus.

Three scenes in these few verses. The slyness of the chief priests, the betrayal of a friend, and the extravagance of a woman. I wonder which of these characters we are more like as we head towards the cross? Let's be like the woman who gave generously and audaciously despite the criticism of others, because Jesus' commendation is worth far more than anyone's criticism.

PRAYER AFTER REFLECTION

"Lord, teach me to be generous;
Teach me to serve you as you deserve;
To give and not to count the cost;
To fight and not to heed the wounds;
To toil, and not to seek for rest;
To labour, and not to ask for reward -
except to know that I am doing your will."

Amen.

(St. Ignatius of Loyola)

OFFERTORY PRAYER

Generous God, we bring our gifts to you with cheerfulness and love. With these gifts we also offer ourselves, all we have and all we are, for your glory's sake. Amen.

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SONG: I WILL OFFER UP MY LIFE

<https://youtu.be/ihUko9M6dpA>

I will offer up my life in spirit and truth
Pouring out the oil of love,
as my worship to you.
In surrender I must give my every part.
Lord, receive this sacrifice of a broken heart.

*Jesus, what can I give, what can I bring,
To so faithful a Friend,
to so loving a King?
Saviour, what can be said,
what can be sung
As a praise of Your name
for the things You have done?
Oh, my words could not tell,
not even in part,
Of the debt of love that is owed
by this thankful heart.*

You deserve my every breath,
for You've paid the great cost,
Giving up your life to death,
even death on the cross.
You took all my shame away,
there defeated my sin,
Opened up the gates of heaven,
and have beckoned me in.

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

Extravagant God, we pray for all the women in the world who are considered unknown and insignificant by others, those unknown to us who live in a world where others decide the rightness of their actions and the motives of their heart. We pray for women's refuges which seek to bring safety to vulnerable women.

Generous Lord
Let our prayers be answered

Extravagant God, we pray for all the political and religious leaders who consider their own actions and motives to be right without

reflecting on their own use or misuse of power. We pray for the government that it would consider the least and the last and not just put their own personal interests before the needs of the vulnerable and the poorest.

Generous Lord
Let our prayers be answered

Extravagant God, we pray for the church, those who follow Jesus and call him Lord. Help us not to be quick to condemn others for their offering of pure devotion, even when it is different from ours. We pray for those who have given and not counted the cost, especially for our brothers and sisters in Christ who have been imprisoned for their faith or who have paid the ultimate price by giving up their lives for you. We also pray for Muslims in Bangladesh who have turned to you and call you now their Saviour and Lord and attend Jesus mosques. We pray for their safety and growth in faith, and their witness to others of your extravagant love and mercy. We also pray for Robert and Roger in hospital and Azaria now at home, for your healing power to touch their lives.

Generous Lord
Let our prayers be answered

Finally, we give thanks for all those who have departed this life in your faith and love, who have left the travails of this world behind. We pray for those grieving on earth, that they may turn to you, Lord of Eternity, and find in your Son Jesus extravagant mercy, comfort and love.

Generous Lord
Let our prayers be answered

All these things we pray in the name of the one who journeyed to the cross for our sake, Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

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THE LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever. Amen.

SONG: ALL I HAVE AND ALL I AM

<https://youtu.be/v3P9H8ERw9w>

All I have and all I am is Yours;
There's nothing that I have on earth
That doesn't come from You.
I lay aside my pride and worldly worth;
To serve You is the greatest thing
That I could ever do.

*For unless You build this house,
I am building it in vain.
Unless the work is Yours,
there is nothing to be gained.
I want something that will stand
when Your holy fire comes;
Something that will last,
and to hear You say 'Well done',
Giving glory to You, Lord,
glory to You, Lord.*

So easy to desire what others have
Instead of seeing all the gifts
That You have given me.
So help me fan the flame which You began,
And burn in me a love for You
That all will clearly see.

CLOSING PRAYER AND BLESSING

Generous God, we now give ourselves to you
this coming week, wherever we are, that our
love for you may have an impact on others that
they may seek you and live. **Amen.**

And now may the blessing of God Almighty,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be with
you and with all whom you love, now and for
evermore. **Amen.**

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
In the name of Christ. Amen.