



Weekly Worship Resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

Available in printed form and online at:
www.longniddrychurch.org.uk

Issue 34: Sunday 1st November 2020

Today's readings

Psalm 116:12–19 (“Thanksgiving for recovery”)

What shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me?

I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord,

I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people.

Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful ones.

O Lord, I am your servant; I am your servant, the child of your serving-maid.

You have loosed my bonds.

I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice and call on the name of the Lord.

I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people,

in the courts of the house of the Lord, in your midst, O Jerusalem.

Praise the Lord! Amen. (NRSV)

Mark 14: 3–9 (“The anointing at Bethany”)

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. But some were there who said to one another in anger, ‘Why was the ointment wasted in this way? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.’ And they scolded her. But Jesus said, ‘Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. 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. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. 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.’ Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

All my hope on God is founded (CH: 192)

Praise waits for thee in Zion, Lord (CH: 44)

Fairest Lord Jesus, ruler of all nature (CH: 463)

Ye servants of God, your Master proclaim (CH: 130)

Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices (CH: 182)

In the Name of the Father and of

My name is Rachael, and I am a servant in the household of Simon. The preparations for my master's special guest were complete. He had long looked forward to welcoming the visitor into his home. This would be a big celebration: an outpouring of thanks for a life-changing encounter. Little did we know that there would be another outpouring that day in the home of Simon.

The first I knew of it was when she stepped forward, a woman with a jar. I had never set eyes on her before, and I knew nothing about her: where she had come from, why she was there ... not even her name. One thing was certain. She had faith: the kind of faith that shows itself through love. For her there were no faltering, failing words of advice, only a single-minded determination to show just how much she appreciated our visitor. She just wanted to show that she valued him ... that she loved him.

If you ask me, this woman did what she could for someone who meant so much. And so, she invested her money – and herself – in the man who would give his all. She passed on a message in a moment of scandalous extravagance – a message of passion that words could never express.

Her devotion was costly. That single jar of perfume was gone in an instant. “What a waste,” they said. “What a waste!”

But I could not be sure.

This woman looked towards something which lay beyond the understanding of the others: an understanding that soon there would be another outpouring of love set to cost so, so much more ...

These words formed part of our Good Friday service for 2020. It was a kind of Passion play, though one with a very big difference (on account of the Covid-19 pandemic). The various readers recorded their lines at home and the whole hour-long act of worship was pieced together, clip by clip, before being made available over the internet. The passage which you heard just now related to Rachael, an imaginary servant in the house which was visited by that woman with an alabaster jar, whom we meet in Mark chapter 14.

As Sheila Jamieson notes in this week's “And finally ...” section on page 4, story is an immensely powerful thing as we step inside the shoes of another person and learn from their experience of life. In Mark chapter 14, we encounter a woman with a powerful story to tell, even though that story involves no words being spoken by her ... not so much as her name.

In fact, the only voices we hear quoted in the whole passage are those of on-lookers (raised in outrage) and that of Jesus (rebuking those present for their lack of understanding). The woman with the alabaster jar says not a word, yet her actions speak volumes, and with crystal clarity. She enters the scene as a rank outsider, does what she came to do, then simply fades away into the background without so much as an “exit stage left”.

So what are we to make of this mystery woman with the jar?

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

When she enters the room so unexpectedly, she brings with her a very considerable challenge sealed up in that jar: costly perfume – pure nard – which she so obviously wants to pour out on the person she admires, perhaps as some kind of tribute to his greatness, or else maybe as a very special personal “thank you” of one kind or another. The exuberant “overflowingness” of her action is what is so obvious here, as her container of ointment is broken, its oh-so-expensive contents freed up for the man she seeks to honour.

I used the word “challenge” a moment ago, because the breaking of the jar is just too much for some of those horrified on-lookers, reclining there in the home of Simon the leper: *‘Why was the ointment wasted in this way? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.’*

Now, I wonder: whose words are these? Are they words spoken only by the witnesses to this act of extravagant devotion? Or are they *our* words also? Yes, where exactly do *we* stand in this story? As Presbyterians, extravagance is not something that might come naturally. We generally think it’s good to live a simple life. We take a dim view of self-indulgence. And we tend to like the idea of using what we have to help make the world a better place. Is it possible that we too know the *price* of things, without stopping to think about their *value*?

It might be that we are ready to tut-tut-tut at the woman and her jar, shaking our heads and uttering, “Honestly!” under our breath. Looking at my own way of thinking, I can most certainly sense my own personal judgementalism at play in the outcry of the witnesses. This anointing seems so sumptuous, so excessive, so lavish. Is the word, “unnecessary”?

The use of the word “anointing” is what really matters here. It’s not just a pouring out, nor yet a tribute to a celebrity from a besotted fan. What we are seeing here is one profoundly insightful person preparing a body for burial *before* death. This woman, it seems, has no special connection to Jesus but she sees what is about to happen a few days hence, and she knows she has to act. Mark is giving his readers a character who makes her entrance as an outsider with no status or privileges, yet who turns out to have true faith and commitment.

Mark gives us many more examples of the devoted outsider. We’ve spent months going through this wee short book, so hopefully you can identify these individuals page by page. Who are they? They are *not* the disciples. Mark wants us to know that the ones close to Jesus are not heroes to be looked up to, but failures who teach us what *not* to do.

Just go back through your copy of Mark’s gospel and circle the examples you can find of people on the fringes who understand what Jesus is about. If you do that, you’ll come up with quite a list, and this nameless woman will be on it. She isn’t interested in doing what people will think is right and proper. She is far more concerned about celebrating the character, the message, the identity of Jesus, as she sets about anointing the Son of God. That’s her loving response in a dark, dark hour. As the biblical scholar Morna Hooker notes: *Mark’s story is not intended to minimize the needs of the poor, but to emphasize that religious observance is less important than one’s response to Jesus. ... The woman’s action is described as a fine thing, a good or praiseworthy act.*

Here is a person who came to Jesus in Holy Week, and who saw the way events were heading. With Good Friday just around the corner, she took decisive action.

Mark puts it very neatly: “She has done what she could.”

And so may we. Amen.

Praying for others

God of lavish outpouring,

Jesus came to this world to live and to love for you,
showing all the world the wonder of your amazing grace.

Just as the woman with the alabaster jar recognised your presence in your Son,
help us to be extravagant in our devotion.

Help us to live out our faithfulness in prayer and in praise,
as we gather Sunday by Sunday and as we live out our calling.

May your Church across all the world speak of your light and your life,
so that all might see your presence all around.

In this world of need we pray for your guidance at this time:
in all the nations of the United Kingdom;
across all the states of the USA;
in those poorest of all lands in which so many are dying at this time.

Guide the peacemakers. Lead those who can inspire wisdom.
Be with all this troubled world, we ask,
blessing each and all in the days which lie ahead.

In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.

And finally . . .

Sheila Jamieson reflects on the power of story:

Philip Pullman says: "Stories are the most important thing in the world. Without stories we wouldn't be human beings at all."

Reading for pleasure is hugely important for children, and we know that many children in the UK do not have a book of their own. Home-Start East Lothian would like to provide each child in every family they support with a book of their very own.

As there can be no Home-Start Family Party with Santa giving out the books this year, doorstep deliveries of Christmas food and gifts are planned during December, and the books will be included with these. The generosity of Gladsmuir and Longniddry has made this possible in the past and once again it will be greatly appreciated if you were able to supply a brightly-coloured, brand new, unwrapped story book suitable for a child under the age of five. It should not be a Christmas book so that it can be enjoyed throughout the year.

If you live in Longniddry, you can place your book in a box in the church on a Tuesday or at a Sunday service, or deliver it to me at 40 Glassel Park Road, EH32 0NY. Gladsmuir residents can take their book to Gladsmuir Church when there is a Sunday service. If you are ordering a book online, you could have it delivered directly to me at the above address if this is more convenient, or if you are unable to purchase a book a monetary contribution could be given, and Home-Start staff would buy a book on your behalf. Cheques should be made payable to Home-Start East Lothian. All contributions should be made by 6th December. If you have any questions or would like more information, please contact me on 07927400437 or 01875 852068.