

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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Today's Bible reading

John 12:1-8 ("Mary Anoints Jesus at Bethany")

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.' Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

Take my life, Lord (CH502)

Who would true valour see (CH535)

O breath of life, come sweeping through us (CH595)

How can I ever thank the Lord (CH76)

When we read the many stories of Jesus we learn a lot about his mind, his thinking, his motivations. We come to see that this extraordinary human being does many extraordinary things as part of his world-changing ministry. And all the way across the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John we find a surprising range of views of what Jesus is all about. Sometimes one gospel writer will come up with a unique story which finds no repetition across the other three books. Often, however, a miracle or some incident on the road or a piece of teaching will find a home in two of the gospels, or three, and occasionally all four. In the case of today's reading we have before us a powerful and compelling encounter that is found in no fewer than three gospels: Matthew, Mark and John. (And just to make sure, I did also do a page by page search of Holy Week in Luke, and can report that our story for today is not there!)

Just a little out of sequence, the anointing of Jesus is an event which the Bible places firmly within Holy Week. Yet for us right now in 2025, the start of Holy Week still lies some seven days away. The reason that this reading from John's gospel appears for us a full week before Palm Sunday is very simple. Next week we will be considering all the "Hosannas" associated with Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem. Then, the following Sunday, we will be occupied with the joyful "Alleluias" of Easter Day. So, if the anointing is genuinely deemed to be so very crucial - important enough to merit a Sunday of its own - then the only way to handle it is to take it out of sequence. So, you might ask, what makes the account of the anointing of Jesus by his good friend Mary so very significant? As we will see, this story really matters to our understanding of who Jesus truly is.

A brief recapping then: we find Jesus and (it seems) at least one of his disciples at the home of his three close friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus (who was so recently brought back from the dead by Jesus). The incident in question takes place in the town of Bethany which lies only two short miles from Jerusalem, the Holy City which will see the bulk of the drama which is to come. Lazarus is at the table with Jesus, while Martha serves everyone dinner. Meanwhile, Mary takes a pound of precious perfume - a staggeringly huge amount - and pours it over Jesus' feet before wiping those same feet with her hair. This, of course, is a symbol of the depth of love which Mary so clearly has for her friend. Yet it also conveys something else - something more. It demonstrates in all its extravagance that Mary realises the end is nigh for Jesus. With the prospect of parting so real for her, she wants to do something powerful to recognise that Jesus, her friend and Lord, is to about to die.

Only one chapter earlier it became clear that the authorities had grown weary of trouble being caused by Jesus. Now anger was rising and outright enmity was well and truly in the air. The rulers and their civil servants in Jerusalem had had enough. Jesus must be stopped, and a plan must be set in place ... and soon:

... the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, 'What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.' But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, 'You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.' ... So from that day on they planned to put him to death.

Here we should pause to consider this intervention by Caiaphas, who as the high priest was even higher in rank than the chief priests. As the religious boss for that year his assessment of the situation might well have carried some real weight among the key figures of the faith. In a similar way, might we look at all this

developing tension and conclude that the word was getting out there: Jesus is done for ... it can only be a matter of time before Caiaphas gets his way.

Reading this story in that light, Mary's symbolic action might very well become a little less of a prophetic act and a little more of a simple recognition that Jesus is going to die. This meal in Bethany might well be her last opportunity to show the depth of her devotion to the man she knows so well and loves so much. Mary, I believe, is not merely showing her theological awareness here. She is expressing her devotion to the one who shortly will be condemned to death.

So now can we do our best perhaps to tease out just a little bit of what is going on in Bethany? Can we maybe see for ourselves that this anointing is an act of outpoured love done in a breath-taking way which is openly designed to tell Martha and Lazarus and their guests - but above all, Jesus himself - that there is an extravagance of such depth and such purity which must be acted out as a visible sign of what Mary is feeling deep inside her soul.

And isn't it lovely that John spares some ink and some parchment to tell us this?:
The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

In a society without modern plumbing where even clean water would have been a rarity - in an age when words like "smell" and "stink" and "stench" would probably have been used so very freely and regularly - here is an action which blots out all that filth and all that odour, sending far and wide the influence of a rare perfume whose beauty may very well have been beyond all their earthly experience. The intensity and the beauty of the act itself would have made a huge impact on all present as, in perfume jar broken and scent released, a life-changing truth is revealed, with one and all taking into their lungs and into their understanding that Jesus is King, anointed as a heralding in of the destiny which is his.

There is a contrast at work in the pen of the gospel writer John in chapter 12. As recently as chapter 11 smell had also played a part. In the words of New Testament scholar, Gail O'Day, Martha had, "worried about the odor of Lazarus's rotting corpse. Here, however, the odor is the marvellous fragrance of nard. The odor of death has been replaced by the odor emanating from Mary's extravagant love."

Now, if you recall, at the start of this sermon I noted that at least one of the disciples was there in Bethany around the table, witnessing all that was going on. And that named disciple was none other than Judas Iscariot who, as keeper of the coffers, naturally would have had the eye always open ... for money. The writer John, however, also makes clear that Judas's key concern was his own financial security:
... he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.

When Judas complains that the 300 denarii (about a year's wages) has been squandered instead of being "given to the poor" perhaps he was lamenting the fact that this wealth was never going to pass into his control - and how he would have loved that! At the very least, Judas is guilty of what we might call an "either/or" love in which you either show your personal devotion to Jesus or you give what you have to alleviate suffering. But Jesus is not about to give that kind of thinking any sort of false credibility. True love will always be a "both/and" love which will start with a devotion to the divine, before spreading outward in social commitment.

In this drama Mary shows her true love, her faith-filled devotion and, perhaps above all else, her fearless defiance in the face of impending cruelty. Even as she kneels down in the act of anointing, Mary stands up for the man she loves. Amen.

Praying for others

God of beauty,
in this world of suffering and regret we turn to you in all humility,
acknowledging all the many shortcomings of our flawed lives.

When we pause to reflect on the commitment of Mary, the devoted friend of Jesus,
we see in our mind's eye someone who recognised her Lord and her God.
We find ourselves humbled by the commitment which Mary was so willing to show
to the man whose life had changed her own living.

Help us in our time to show such commitment to our Lord and our neighbours.

Here in East Lothian we look around and see people who stand apart,
as a result of many factors: loneliness, fear, bereavement,
an unwillingness to risk becoming involved with the lives of others.

May we, the servants of Jesus, look out for their needs,
engaging others in the life of the church, befriending and
being there for those people who find it hard to reach
beyond their front doors.

In this our land we see young people who have lost hope
and old people who have lost faith in one way or another.
As people of Christ, may we stand firm in the the truth of the Gospel,
bringing the fragrance of your presence
into the difficult corners of other people's living.

All this we pray in the Name of Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. Amen.

Weekly Updates ...

"Passion Sunday Blues": Gladsmuir Church's first **"Sing at 6.30"** service for 2025 will take place on Passion Sunday, 13th April, at half past six. Everyone is welcome to join in a lively service which will combine hymn-singing, Holy Week readings from Mark's gospel and dramatised reflections on Jesus' journey to the Cross. In addition, we will be welcoming the Christian singer and blues guitarist, Andy Shuttleworth, who will be providing soulful musical reflections across the service. Admission is free, with refreshments served. Our retiring offering will be for Christian Aid Scotland.

Easter Day Communion and Breakfast: A reminder that we will meet (ideally on the Longniddry Church lawn!) at 8am on Sunday 20th April to celebrate the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, followed by breakfast in Room 2. All welcome.

"Coffee Catch-Up": Our next friendly chat will take place at Starbucks near the top of the Coal Road on Friday 25th April at 10am. All welcome!

New Age Kurling: Tuesdays from 2-4pm in Room 3, Longniddry Church.

Wednesday Club: From 2.30-4pm in Room 2, Longniddry Church. Come along and enjoy a variety of activities and tea/coffee. (Contact Janet: 07766 574123).

Sporting Memories Group: Thursdays from 10.30am - 12 noon in Room 3, Longniddry Church.