

Sermon delivered by Rev Anne Hoad on Passion Sunday, 25th March 2018

Text: St Mark: ch 14, vs 1 - 15

The last recorded act of Jesus' life was about to open. The Passover was one of three compulsory feasts, and to these feasts every male adult Jew, who lived near Jerusalem, was bound to come. But many more than these came. It was the ambition of every Jew to eat at least one Passover meal in the holy city before he died. During the Passover period all lodging in Jerusalem was free and the crowds could not all be accommodated. Bethany and Bethphage were two of the outlying villages where pilgrims lodged, so the last act of Jesus' life was to be played out in a city crammed with Jews. The story of the woman in Bethany was the last act of kindness done to Jesus.

It was customary to anoint face, hands and feet with olive oil, especially before any kind of social occasion. Those who could afford it mixed a little perfume with the oil. Perfume was expensive and was sold in alabaster or pottery bottles with long narrow necks, so that it would pour very slowly and every drop be valued. But this woman broke off the neck of the bottle and poured out the entire contents at once. This was extravagant in the extreme. In today's terms it was worth about £25,000, which must have amounted to all her life's savings. There were no banks at that time, so savings were invested in precious commodities like gold, frankincense and myrrh, as brought by the three wise men at Jesus' birth. This perfume, derived from genuine nard, a rare plant from far off India, would have been a very precious ointment. The whole lot, poured over Jesus' head from the broken flask, demonstrated a reckless love; an extravagant love.

Jesus said, in response to criticism, she has done a lovely thing to me. There are two words for "good." *Agathos*, which is something morally good, and there is *Kalos* which is used here to describe something not just good, but lovely. Her action was taking the chance to do something which comes only once in a lifetime and mustn't be missed. We may recognise it as the impulse to send a letter of thanks, the impulse to give a special gift or to tell someone you love them. We are often moved to do something like this, but are held back by shyness or feeling awkward and so we miss the opportunity. We are hampered by second thoughts, but this woman expresses her true self through the unfolding of unconstrained love. Your true self is who you are and always have been in God, and at its core it is love itself. Love is both who you are and who you are still becoming. All you can do is nurture it. God never forces himself on us or coerces us towards love. God utterly respects our human freedom. Love cannot happen in any other way. Love flourishes inside freedom.

"Christ has set us free," writes St Paul: Galatians ch 5 vs 1. Jesus recognises and welcomes what the woman has done. Love and our deep need in love alone, recognises love itself. Remember that you already are what you are seeking. Any fear that you are unworthy or unfaithful is misguided. "Will their faithlessness cancel the faithfulness of God?" asks St Paul and answers "Certainly not!": Romans ch 3 vs 3. Love finally overcomes fear and your house is being built on a new and solid foundation for "It is love that lasts for ever": 1 Corinthians ch 13 vs 13. All you have loved in your life and been loved by, is eternal and true. The very failures and radical insufficiency of our lives, is what leads us into the larger life of love.

"It is the person who is forgiven little, who shows little love," says Jesus: Luke ch 7 vs 47. Do you realise how counterintuitive this is? It is our mistakes that lead us to God. We come to divine union not only by doing it right, but by doing it wrong as we all most surely do. This woman is the icon of love itself - love needed, given, received and passed on. Here in Jesus is the clear affirmation of this wonderful and astounding message. "It is a wonderful thing that she has done for me". All, absolutely everything, is now made use of in the great economy of grace. You can now enjoy unearned love in yourself and allow it in everyone else too.

The woman's loving action provokes grudging criticism by the bystanders. They sneer at her behaviour. They think they know better about the use of money. The precious ointment would have cost the working man about a year's pay. A shameful waste they thought. The money might have been given to the poor. But Jesus understood. He quoted their own scriptures to them. "The poor shall never cease out of the land": Deuteronomy ch 15 vs 11. You can help the poor any time, but there is not long to do anything for me. this is like anointing my body beforehand, for its

burial. There was a custom in the East, first to bathe and then anoint the bodies of the dead. After the body had been anointed, the flask in which the perfume had been contained, was broken and the fragments were laid with the dead body in the tomb.

Set side by side with this anointing with love is set the act of terrible treachery, the betrayal by Judas for which he would receive a financial reward.

Next we are told of the preparation for the Passover, which Jesus had not left until the last minute. He had already arranged that the colt would be ready for his ride into Jerusalem. Jesus sent his disciples to Jerusalem with instructions to look for a man carrying a pitcher of water. That was a woman's job, so a man doing a woman's job would stand out. The larger Jewish homes had upper rooms approached by outside stairs, so it was unnecessary to go through the main room. It would have many uses, but one would be a guest room for visitors. It would be the place where a Rabbi would teach his chosen disciples. Preparations had to be made for the meal.

To sum up the story of the woman: Jesus believed that the Good News would go all round the world, and with that news would go the memory of the wonderful thing she had done out of her heart of love.