

**Date:** 20th April 2011

**Sermon:** Rev Dr Brenda Robson

**Reading:** Mark 14 : 1 – 11 *She did what she could*

### **Background to the reading**

I do not want to say too much about the background to this reading because there has been a huge amount of theological debate about the story of the anointing of Jesus. Books have been written on the subject. Apart from the death and resurrection of Jesus, this is one of the few stories told in all four gospels. That is probably because Jesus said that this woman would be remembered throughout the world and throughout time because of what she did. Each account of the story is slightly different which has led to debate about exactly when it took place, where it took place, in whose house, who was the woman?

I don't want us to be distracted by those factors tonight, I want to focus on what happened so that you go away thinking not about when, where and who but about the love of Jesus and the love of this woman for Jesus.

The woman was a sinner like each one of us – not necessarily a prostitute as we are often told. Jesus was a guest dining with his disciples and others when the woman came into the room carrying an alabaster jar containing expensive perfume. She offended by her very presence, coming uninvited where men were eating. She offended much more by breaking the jar and pouring the contents over Jesus head and perhaps over his feet too. A whole pint of the stuff, the room would have been filled with the smell of perfume, the men would not be able to smell their dinner for perfume! And in one account of the story the woman dried Jesus feet with her hair. For a woman to appear in public with loose hair was completely taboo, it was seen as sexually provocative, perhaps like a woman today appearing topless in the wrong place.

The perfume itself was costly. It was produced far away in Nepal and would have travelled overland or by sea to the Middle East where it would have cost a whole year of the average man's wages. The jar itself was probably expensive too and she broke it – so she had to use all the perfume, the jar was broken and she could not put the lid back on.

Everything about the scene was wrong according to the traditions of the day, offensive, outrageous. But so many scenes from Jesus' life were like this. And the men present were angry and told the woman off, criticising her for wasting perfume which could have been sold and the money given to the poor.

But Jesus stops them – he tells them that she has done a beautiful to him. The poor would always be with them but Jesus would soon not be with them – and the woman had done what she could. And then those prophetic words – she poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial.

AMEN

## Reflection

The story of Jesus' anointing at Bethany is a love story. It is a story of love between Jesus and a woman, not in the romantic sense, but for the woman she had found in Jesus a love that reached into the depths of her being, that transformed her life, gave her a sense of worth and value in the eyes of God, gave her faith and hope. There is a lot of theological debate about who this woman was but it does not really matter if she was a prostitute or the town gossip, a rich woman or a poor woman, what matters is she was a sinful woman who was loved by Jesus.

She was a sinful woman who knew total forgiveness and who had been given the gift of eternal life. What could she do for Jesus in return?

We tend to exchange gifts with other people of roughly equal value. We might spend £10 or £15 on a gift for a friend at birthday or Christmas and receive a similar gift back. We spend more on a family member and more still on a close family member and that will be reciprocated. At the office or workplace there might be a pot luck Christmas present where everybody spends exactly the same amount on a gift and the gifts are pooled, an extreme example of equal giving and receiving. But how could this woman repay Jesus? His gift was priceless. He had done more for her than any other person had ever done or ever would do. She knew that she did not deserve the love so freely given. Matt Redman's song – I will offer up my life

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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

Words would not do. Because this woman recognised that although Jesus had done an amazing thing for her, his work was not complete, he was going to do something even more amazing. She knew what all the men around that table did not know, she knew what the disciples did not recognise, she knew that Jesus was going to die and he was going to die soon. Perhaps she had understood what Jesus had said as he tried to prepare his followers for his death, he had told them at least three times that he was going to die - perhaps the holy spirit had opened up her mind and given her this knowledge – possibly both.

And so she did a beautiful thing for Jesus. Isn't that such a beautiful phrase. Jesus was pleased with her gift. Jesus would be removed hurriedly from the cross and placed in the tomb without ceremony because it was almost the Sabbath when he died. Remember the women arrived at the tomb a day later on Easter Sunday to anoint the body with spices and perfumes. Perhaps the woman did not understand

the whole significance of her anointing Jesus with perfume but Jesus saw the connection – she was preparing his body for burial -before his death.

Jesus is not a hard taskmaster, he calls us to do what we can and when we do something for him, even if it is not perfect or heroic, he calls it a beautiful thing. Some women have been called to be heroines and their deeds are recorded for all to hear – Gladys Aylward in China, Mother Teresa in India, Jackie Pullinger in Hong Kong, Heidi Baker in Africa. We heard from Nanda last night about the woman in New York single handedly organising aid for Africa. But most women, and men, are called to more modest service, service locally in their own communities, called to do what they can, each act something beautiful for God.

Andre and Nanda have preached this week on faith and hope – and they have done something beautiful for Jesus.

We have been moved this week by voices singing like angels and music that has inspired us – and Jesus has called these offerings beautiful – each person has done what he or she could, using their God given gifts and talents.

There was lovely homemade fruit cake with the teas last night – brought as an offering for all of us in Jesus name.

And each person who is joining in these holy week services is doing something beautiful for Jesus – we are bringing our worship and our praise and our thankfulness and our love. We are trying to journey with Jesus, trying to understand the depth of his love for us and the suffering he endured on our behalf.

Tomorrow night we will be able to draw as close to Jesus as it is possible for us to do in this life as we share in the bread and wine, remembering his body broken and his blood shed.

In our giving and our service, let us be as extravagant as the woman who poured a whole pint of perfume on Jesus. Let us hold nothing back. Let us offer to Jesus all that we can in whatever we do as we serve and love one another. Just as the men around the table saw the woman's extravagant gift to Jesus, so others look at our deeds and behaviour and should be drawn to Christ.

As Paul said in his second letter to the Corinthians, verse 15 – in The Message – **In the Messiah, in Christ. God leads us from place to place in one perpetual victory parade. Through us, he brings knowledge of Christ. Everywhere we go, people breathe in the exquisite fragrance. Because of Christ, we give off a sweet scent rising to God which is recognised by those on the way of salvation. To one we are the smell of death, to the other, the fragrance of life.**

A final thought. Smell lingers.

Have you ever split milk? Friends split a whole bottle of milk in the boot of their car which went under the back seat. They could never ever get rid of the smell of sour milk, even when they renewed the back seat.

Jesus was anointed with a large amount of powerful perfume, it was through his hair, on his skin, perhaps soaked into his clothing.

As Jesus wept before his Father in the Garden of Gethsemane, did his tears mingle with the perfume, reminding him of the beautiful gift of the disciple who loved him? As he struggled in the heat and the dust carrying his cross, did he catch the scent of that perfume, giving him strength to go on?

And in the darkness of the cross, weighed down by sin, as blood and sweat ran down his face, did the smell still linger, bringing a morsel of comfort, the woman had understood, many of those standing around the cross would soon understand, even a Roman centurion, and over two thousand years later the aroma of his salvation would still be bringing faith, hope and love to the world through millions of followers like you and me, who are called to do beautiful things for him.

AMEN