

The woman who annointed Jesus

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[0:00] Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume.

! She poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected. Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor?

It was worth a year's wages. He did not say this because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief.

As keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to whatever was put into it. Leave her alone, Jesus replied. It was intended, or it was for, or something like that, that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial.

[1:19] You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me. Meanwhile, a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him, but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.

So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well. For on account of him, many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him.

And then, after that, comes the triumphal entry. Help us, Lord, to hear your word and to meet with you in the pages of scripture. For your dear name's sake. Amen.

Last time we were in John chapter 2, with the changing of water into wine. And you might remember in verse 4, chapter 2, verse 4, that Jesus had said, My hour has not yet come.

And it didn't really seem to make a whole lot of sense why he should say that. Unless you add into it an unspoken thought that what he's referring to is an hour, an hour for wine and wedding and feast.

[2:38] And what was the song that we finished up with last time? How does that one go? The one about dancing.

There's a wedding, there's a feast. Da, da, da, da, da, da. How does that start? You don't know.

There's a place where the streets shine with the glory of the Lamb. And the verse says that there's a wedding, there's a feast.

No more sorrow, no more death. And I think the way to understand John chapter 2 is to say that's what Jesus was thinking about.

His mind is on that. The hour has not yet come for the wedding and the feast. But the hour does mean that there is a clock ticking.

And it ticks down through John's gospel. So for example, in John chapter 7 verse 30, he uses the same expression.

[3:40] John chapter 7 verse 30. They tried to seize him but no one laid a hand on him because his hour had not yet come. So there's an hour coming but it hasn't yet come.

And when we get to chapter 12, we suddenly find that the alarm clock goes off. Of course in 1222, there's some Greeks.

Verse 20. Some Greeks were among those who went up to worship at the feast. They came to Philip who was from Bethsaida in Galilee with a request. Sir, they said, we would like to see Jesus. Philip went to tell Andrew.

Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus. And Jesus says, the hour has come. That's it. The hour has come. The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

I tell you the truth, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds, more literally much fruit.

[4:44] Remember, Jesus talked about bearing much fruit. And he says that when he dies, he will produce much fruit. So that's where we're headed. And at the moment, the clock is still ticking in the beginning of chapter 12.

Leading up to that, we read, I think on Wednesday evening, the chapter 11, which is of Lazarus. Lazarus, his death, the fact that Jesus arrived too late.

But Jesus said, no, that's all right. That was a part of the plan. And there is this amazing conversation where, in 11:21, Martha says to Jesus, if you'd been here, my brother wouldn't have died.

But I know that even now, God will give you whatever you ask. And Jesus says to her, your brother will rise again. And she says, yeah, I know that. He will rise again in the resurrection in the last day. That's a big step of faith in itself. And Jesus says, actually, everything that constitutes the last day and its power and transformation and radical change in the whole cosmos.

[5:50] That's me standing here in front of you. I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live even though he dies. Whoever lives and believes in me will never die.

Do you believe this? So Jesus presenting himself as the resurrection and the life. And he does indeed raise Lazarus from the dead. He shouts, come out to this man who is dead.

Being dead is a very serious form of deafness. You actually cannot hear at all. And it's also a very serious form of paralysis because dead people can't move their limbs.

But the power of Jesus' word is such that when he says, come out, the dead man obeys the word of Jesus Christ and comes out. Which is rather like the miracle of the new birth, actually.

That's how people become Christians. Dead people who can't respond, respond because of the power of the grace of God. And we follow through into the end of chapter 12 which we glimpsed a little bit, some of us this morning at the prayer time.

[6:58] When the Sanhedrin, the chief priests and the Pharisees and all the bigwigs. So the sort of house of lords gathers end of chapter 11.

And they say, this is getting us nowhere. This is getting us nowhere. Jesus is healing people. He's raising the dead. And people are convinced by him. That's not surprising, is it?

And if we let this go on, chapter 11, verse 48, everyone will believe in him. So we better put a stop to it.

It's a curious sort of logic, isn't it? There he is, healing people, raising the dead. We better put a stop to it. Why had we better put a stop to it? Well, they say the Romans will come and take away our place and our nation.

So not God's place and God's nation, but our place, our nation. It's a power thing. Our temple, our temple, our nation.

[8:04] And so they come up with this very logical scheme that somebody should, it would be a better calculation if Jesus died and the nation was untouched by the Romans rather than the other way around.

So verse 50, Caiaphas says, you don't realize it's better that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish. And he spoke truly, even though it wasn't true in the way that he thought it was true.

One man should die for the nation. And John says, well, that's exactly right. If you like, it's a prophecy stating something that is true, even though not in the way that he might have thought. Verse 51, Jesus would die for the Jewish nation and not only for that nation also, but also for the scattered children of God to bring them together and make them one. So that's what Jesus would do.

He would die, not only for the Jews, but for the Gentiles and bring them all together in one church, in one people of God. It's an amazing vision of what Jesus is going to do.

[9:15] So we're headed towards the Passover. Verse 11:55. It's almost time for the Jewish Passover. We shouldn't let the significance of that escape you.

The Passover is the Jewish National Day. So are there any Swiss people here today? Swiss National Day is August the somethingth, isn't it? August the 5th.

Well, I remember finding it in my diary once, in the days when milkman delivered milk. And he, the milkman was delivering milk. I said to the milkman, do you know it's Swiss National Day?

And he said, oh, is it mate? All right. Good on him. I thought, yeah, good on him. Okay, Swiss National Day. So this is, this is Israelite National Day. This is the day when everybody thinks, we're here, we are.

We used to be slaves, but we're now a nation. Look at us. This is, and they celebrated that in the killing of the lambs. And Josephus, the Jewish historian, has got statistics of how many people were there, how many people gathered, how many lambs they must have had to kill.

[10:21] Just a huge, great festival. You know, sort of think Glastonbury, but with a sacrifice, with killing lambs. So this is, pardon? Okay.

So this is where we're headed, but we haven't quite got there. So let's go to John 12. So I haven't done the clicking thing on this by the look of it.

I was going to do this in reverse order. So 1236. Chapter 12 is the conclusion of Jesus' public ministry, or, you know, his freely conducted public ministry.

He's going to say things sort of in public. He's going to say a lot in private. But this is sort of the end of his major public ministry. So in chapter 36, sorry, in chapter 12, verse 36, he says, Put your trust in the light while you have it, so that you may become sons of light.

He says, you know, this is the last chance for these people. This generation of people, this crowd of people, you're going to be invited to trust, you're going to be invited to repent, and this will be your last opportunity to do so.

[11:37] At least in this particular way. That's rather sober, isn't it? Because we usually think we're going to have another opportunity to do things. You know, we'll have another opportunity to see Call the Midwife, because it'll come round again.

Certainly be another opportunity to see Doctor Who, because that will be repeated. But Jesus says, you don't always have the opportunity to repent. There'll be a point at which that opportunity will have gone.

Make the most of the opportunity that you've got. And Jesus says, Walk in the light while you have the light. Chapter 12, verse 35. You are going to have the light just a little while longer.

Walk while you have the light before darkness overtakes you. So that's sort of what's happening at the end of that chapter. And so I'm working backwards.

So now I've got to verse 22 and 23, which I've already mentioned about the Greeks coming and asking. The foreigners, the non-Jews asking. And Jesus saying, This is the hour.

[12:42] You know, this is the whole thing that we've been working towards. And in verse 27, Jesus says, Now my heart is troubled.

What shall I say, Father? Father, save me from this hour. No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name. So sense something of the drama of that.

And previous to that was the triumphal entry, which we'll look at next week, God willing. And previous to that is this private-ish dinner at Bethany with Lazarus and Mary and Martha.

Mark tells us it was in the house of Simon the leper. So you have to work out how that happened. I was at our grandson's birthday party yesterday, but it wasn't in the house of his mum and dad because the house was too small.

So they borrowed the house of Nathan and Lottie. So maybe they did the same thing when they had Jesus to dinner. There wasn't enough room in our front room, so can we go next door to the house of Simon the leper?

[13:51] Right. I don't know. Okay, let's follow the text through. Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived at Bethany where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.

We get reminded of that twice here. Here a dinner was given for Jesus. Martha served. So I put Jesus there.

And Martha served. So she's whizzing around with multiple plates of things. The word is to deacon, incidentally. She served. She deaconed. While Lazarus was among those reclining at tables.

So he's around the far side of the table somewhere. And Mary took a litre, whatever a litre is.

So here it's translated a pint. So that's imperial measurement. A pint of stuff, of pure nard. We'll look at that in a moment.

[14:47] An expensive perfume. And she pours it on Jesus' feet and wipes his feet with her hair. It must have been a very remarkable thing to see.

Because women didn't usually show off their hair. It would be tied back. But she looses her hair so she can wash his feet. And it says, The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

Sense of smell actually takes you back somewhere very quickly, doesn't it? Have you ever had that experience? You're walking around, smell something. You remember that time when you were 11 and a half years old. And you had a cold.

And your mum took you out to walk somewhere. And you smelt that same smell. Sort of instantly transported that. And I wonder whether when John writes this, Every time he smelt that he thought, It's almost like being there.

Just takes me back to that time when there was that supper given in the honour of Jesus. Lazarus was over there.

[15:56] And Jesus was here. Which one was it? Martha had all those plates. And Mary took that ointment, that oil stuff, and poured it over Jesus' feet.

And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. Now, in a minute Judas is going to say something. But let's leave him out of it for the moment. So, the wording says, It was a litron of myrrh, nard.

The word for pure is bistikos, I think. Which is actually faithful. Isn't that an interesting word to use? It was faithful nard.

Faithful in the sense that what it said on the tin was what was inside it. You know, it gave you a true description. It's faithful. But I rather like the thought of that word. It was myrrh, nard, faithful.

And then it says, It was of great value. It was of great value. Great worth. Translated here, expensive. But what it's saying is of great worth.

[17:19] And she oiled Jesus' feet. And then the word to dry is like kneading. She kneaded his feet with her hair. Like that.

And what does it say? Yeah, he kneaded out his feet with her hair. Plural, her hairs. And the house was filled with the odour.

Last time the word odour was used was? Lazarus. And in connection with? His death.

Why? Because he'd been dead for quite a while. And it's in the NIV. It says, There is a bad odour. Verse 11, verse 39. There is a bad odour. The NIV. No, sorry. The authorised version. Anybody got an authorised version? It sort of unmemorably says, Behold, he stinketh.

[18:28] But I think what it actually says, he smells. I think it's just the word for smell. Which is the same, not exactly the same word, but a very, very similar word here. So we had the smell of death.

I don't think I've ever smelled a dead body. But I'm sure there is such a thing. I believe other people's accounts. I don't think I have to go there myself, as it were.

So that bad smell compared with this beautiful smell that just fills the house. We used to do an experiment at school where we released chlorine gas.

You won't be allowed to do this nowadays. Deadly chlorine gas into a gas jar. And you had to measure the speed at which it made its way through the jar.

Smells can travel pretty quickly, can't they? If we're in a reasonably small house, crack this jar open. You know, everybody's saying, God, what's happened?

[19:41] It's an immediate thing. It's a very strong thing. And I think that one of the main points of this story is very beautiful. It's just a beautiful thing. A beautiful, generous, wonderful thing that she did.

Always going to be remembered. These words for smell are used only a limited number of times in the New Testament. And it might be worth looking them up.

2 Corinthians 4. 2 Corinthians 2. 14 through to 16.

This is not John. This is the Apostle Paul. And he says, 2 Corinthians 2. 14 to 16. He says, when he's referring to his own gospel ministry, which got him into some pretty tight situations, he says, thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us, spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him.

We are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death. To the other the fragrance of life.

[21:06] And who is equal to such a task? That's Paul putting his ministry in terms of perfume, smell. Everywhere he goes, he says, we spread an aroma.

When some people sniff it, they think that's wonderful and beautiful. And God certainly does. Isn't that right? We are to God the aroma of Christ. God says that's wonderful and beautiful.

Some people think it stinks. That Christianity stinks. It's like a dead body. The smell of death.

Interesting thought, isn't it? Ephesians 5, 2. Referring to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Ephesians 5. Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

[22:07] The offering that Jesus made of himself has an aroma or can be thought of as an aroma that God smells and says is fragrant and delightful and wonderful.

And I suppose Paul is saying we ought to be like that. And Philippians 4, Paul 18.

He says, I have received your full payment and even more. I am amply supplied so that now I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God.

So he says that this, presumably a financial contribution, this generous deed that these guys did for Paul, he says that's got a fragrance to it.

Let's go back to the scene in John 12 and let's bring Judas into the situation.

[23:25] one of his disciples, verse 4, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected. So there's him objecting. And so he is labelled as the one who is later to betray Jesus and John keeps, every now and again reminds us that Jesus wasn't taken by surprise by this betrayal.

And he says, why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages.

Well what he actually says, it was 300 denarii and a denarius was about a day's work. So 300 is about a year, a year's worth of work.

It's a lot of money, isn't it? I mean, I don't know how you work out the comparison, but if you said that minimum wage, somebody would be earning, what, 12K, 13K, 14K, 15K, I don't know, I haven't done the sums.

But if you transported it into those sorts of terms, this is 13,000 pounds worth of perfume that's just gone up in smoke, as it were.

[24:46] And Judas says, with a lot of logic to it, you could have done a lot with that. You could have employed somebody, BHT, for, I don't know, I don't know what sort of pay scales they have, but if you said half a year, you could employ somebody, St. Mungo's Pavilions, they've only got eight workers looking after homeless people in the city, you could employ another half worker for that.

That would be a very good thing to do. It makes a lot of sense, but verse 6 tells us that what he was really thinking wasn't adequately expressed by what came out of his mouth.

Verse 6 is rather, rather unflattering. He did not say this because he cared about the poor. He didn't say this because the poor meant anything to him.

He was a thief. And he was the man who carried the bag. Maria and I were looking through the, I was reading the text to Maria and we were commenting on it as we went up to Oxford the other day. And the word for the bag is the thing with the tongue. So it uses the word glosser, which is tongue. So presumably it was a bag with a sort of flap over the end of it. And he looked after this tongue bag thing.

[26:20] But it also says as keeper of the money bag, it says he used to lift stuff from it. He used to help himself from what was put in it. He was a thief. He had the person, he lifted stuff out of it.

That's a bit, it's, what's the word, a bit deflating, isn't it? Because from one point of view, he would say, that's very sensible. 13,000 pounds, do a lot with 13,000 pounds.

But he didn't really care. It was logical. Had a sort of logic and calculatingness to it. But in fact, it was uncaring, ungenerous.

And what he was really thinking of was enriching himself. This is horrible, really, isn't it? It's a very unflattering portrait of the human heart in its, in the negative things it's capable of.

And he was saying all the right things, wasn't he? It sounded very logical. We are to love our neighbor as ourselves.

[27:30] So he's criticized, really, for being uncaring, isn't he? He didn't say this because he cared about the poor. That's a criticism. We are to care about the poor. And perhaps we come under the same criticism.

We say things because we don't really care about the poor. We're a bit like Judas in that. I mean, the text is saying we should care about the poor. No, we shouldn't let logic and doctrine and correctness or whatever it is end up with that we don't really care about the poor.

One of the main things, love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind and your neighbor as yourself. How can you not care about the poor? But Jesus says in this particular occasion, just get off her back.

Leave her alone. And it's singular. It isn't you lot get off her back. It's you Judas get off her back.

Leave her alone. And he says this somehow fits with his burial.

Verse 7. It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You can see from the little marks. Have you got little marks in your text NIV?

[28:51] Little marks that mean the it was intended is being put in by the translators? Have you got little tiny marks? No. Yes? Some yes. Some no. It's not entirely clear what the form of the sentence is but it's something that says this is to do with my burial.

burial. There is a real appropriateness of this somewhat illogical spontaneous or reasonably spontaneous gesture.

It fits with my burial. And Jesus it would appear that his death and his burial is very much on his mind.

this is the thing that is coming and if anybody is understanding that and fitting in with that they're in God's you know they're fitting in with God in this.

So don't get off her back she's fitting in with this this is right. Jesus is very conscious of his death coming. and we're to remember Jesus' death aren't we?

[30:11] That's perhaps another application of what Chris was saying this morning about remembering the thing that we're told to remember as Christians is Jesus in his death.

Isn't that right? Around the table remember me do this in remembrance of me my death my broken body my shed blood. And she's sort of remembering in advance and Jesus says get off her back that's right.

And he goes on to say you will always have the poor among you but you will not always have me. In other words you'll always have opportunities to give to the poor I'm not saying that that's a wrong thing to do at all that's a right thing to do want to be criticized for not being concerned about that. But here is a particular opportunity says Jesus to it's not offering something it's not love love is it devotion!

Is it worship? Is it sacrifice? Is it rather indefinable and simply you say this is love for Jesus.

[31:45] She saw a way to say to the Lord Jesus I love you with just everything that I've got every ounce of gratitude everything that I estimate valuable you are the most precious of all and here is my way of showing it and it cost me 13 grand well I don't care but it's all yours it's a wonderful a wonderful thing for her to do this opportunity to show love to me says Jesus is special and for my concluding thought just now I wonder when such opportunities crop up Jesus sort of implies they're not there all the time, the poor are there all the time but this particular opportunity for

Mary was there and then maybe there are particular opportunities that come to us perhaps not all the time perhaps every now and again that we could show some real spontaneous generous almost irrational love for the Lord Jesus I thought of two examples I remember when we were in church at

St. James's Church in Ryde which is the church I go to when we're back on the Isle of Wight and I was talking to somebody who was also called Wells but who's no family relation and he was talking about somebody that he knew who had a factory on the Isle of Wight at this point my memory gets a bit hazy but he'd made a lot of money a lot of money and he'd planned it for his retirement and security and everything and this guy

Christian had said he just thought actually blow that I'll just give it all away and he did out of love for the Lord Jesus you don't always get that opportunity do you but he had that opportunity and he just rashly but marvelously gave it all away and then I thought of another thing which seems to me to be similar but I don't know what you think yesterday I met my son-in-law's mum and dad Maggie and Jessica and a bit older than Maria and myself Jessica's mother and father were missionaries and they are now 101 and 99 years of age and she said it's rather sad now that they are they're not as capable of you know of independence as they were but up to up to quite recently they looked after one another for all those years they cared for one another and that was their gift if you like that was their love not in one fell swoop you know like giving away a fortune but giving themselves totally day by day week by week month by month year by year decade by decade century by century in love just loving one another and I thought that might be an example of a gift to Jesus of that nature I think that's all I've got to say this evening click yes let's pray thank you Lord for this text and its beauty help us to read it and