

Looking forward to Easter (1)

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 13 April 2014

Preacher: Philip Wells

[0 : 00] If you're not used to looking in the Bible, nevertheless have a go because we are going to look at the text. We're going to look and see what it actually says. And my intention this morning is to go through what it says, to try and make it clear and to bring out some of the implications of it.

So while you're finding John chapter 12, maybe Ben, please could you pray for us as we come to hear God's word?

I forgot my pens. So we're going to look together into John chapter 12.

And if you've come along this morning wanting to know God really, this is exactly the place to come. Because God makes himself known, not by bizarre things that he does, but by the exact things that he says.

In the same way that we as human beings get to know one another in speech. So God speaks through the Bible and we hear God's voice.

[1 : 33] And if you've come along hoping as far as possible to avoid God, this is the dangerous bit. Because he might not let you avoid him.

Anyway, here's my introduction. Thinking of historic events that change world history. Historic events that changed world history.

What would you think of? I thought of the Twin Towers. And it has a number attached to it, 9-11.

Which is obviously, as we know, the wrong way round for doing months and years. So it should be 11-9. But it's got a date thing attached to it. The terrorist attack on the Twin Towers.

Everybody has heard of that. Other historic events that changed world history. The banking collapse in the 1930s had a huge effect.

[2 : 32] That's got a date attached to it as well. Or you might, if you are English, think of the invasion of England by the Normans. Which took place just down the coast towards Hastings.

They should have invaded Brighton because it has much more facilities than Hastings. But they chose to invade Hastings around that sort of... And that's got a date too, a memorable date. 10-66. But I'm going to suggest that there is another memorable event. The death and resurrection of Jesus. And interestingly, not at that time, but hundreds of years later, people thought, we'll actually give that a date too.

And we'll date that as zero. And date everything else from that, more or less. And that's interesting, isn't it? All the other dates are related in our calendar to this date.

At least somebody thought the death and resurrection of Jesus was the central historic event that changed world history. Well, let's think about that and see whether you agree with that estimate of the importance of it.

[3 : 46] So we're going to look in John's Gospel, chapter 12. Which has been read to us. We're picking up a story which is already in motion. And next week we'll follow it through some more of it, if you're interested to come.

There's a story here moving to its climax. If you're familiar with John's Gospel, you will know that the way he structures it, and he does structure it because he's a thinking person, he structures it with signs.

things that Jesus did that point to something bigger than the sign itself.

So in John's Gospel, chapter 5, you might like to flip back to that, there is the healing of a paralysed man. And you might think, well, that's a relatively, you know, insignificant thing.

But John makes a lot of it, and he says this is a very significant event. The paralysed man was made well. Jesus said to him, arise, and up he got.

[4 : 53] And John reads a lot into that and says, actually, the power of Jesus to say, arise, well, that has all sorts of repercussions. But you might be interested to know that he was not without his

critics.

And Jesus was criticized for this healing, and he was criticized by his Jewish contemporaries because he did it on the wrong day, because he did it on the Sabbath.

And another sign, for example, is in chapter 6, this huge sign that most people have heard of, the feeding of the 5,000, where Jesus took some bread and fish and fed a huge number of people.

And that was an amazing thing, and people were still wondering, what does that mean? What does this say about who this person is? I have to say that people misunderstood it.

People got the wrong end of the stick, as they still do nowadays. And when Jesus was talking about it later, he said, I am the bread of life. And then he went on to say, and some people thought it was a mistake of him saying this, unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you.

[6 : 09] It seems a very bizarre and gory thing for him to say, but that's what he said. People didn't like that. And then the sign that's most recent to our chapter was in chapter 11, where Lazarus, a friend of Jesus, had died.

Jesus deliberately postponed arriving at the scene until he was definitely dead. They thought he would be decomposing by this time. And Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead.

And you'd think, well, that's a bit of a showstopper. I have to say that quite a number of people didn't like him doing that and thought that this was proof that he ought to be got rid of.

And if you're in chapter 11, if you look down to verse 50, this is the high priest Caiaphas, and they're debating together these signs that Jesus has done.

And in chapter 11, verse 47, the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. What are we accomplishing? They said, here is this man performing many miraculous signs.

[7 : 21] If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him. Then the Romans will come and take away our place and our nation. So notice the people who are on the ground didn't say he didn't do these signs.

They said he did do them, but we just don't like the implications of them. And Caiaphas, the high priest, verse 49, says, well, here's the way out of it.

You know nothing at all. You do not realize it is better that one man die for the people than the whole nation perish. And so again, the idea of Jesus being not only unpopular, but unwanted, and not only unwanted, but doomed.

And they say, we're going to get him. And ironically, the explanation that Caiaphas gives, one man die for the people, is exactly the same explanation that God gives, except God's understanding of it is different to Caiaphas'.

So here's our introduction. The story has been moving on. And so far, we have some people who see these signs and believe in Jesus, although the quality of their faith is not always what you'd like it to be.

[8 : 35] And some people who see these signs and have firmly decided they're going to reject Jesus. And that's the motion of the story so far. Are you with me so far?

Yep. Good. It just gives me a bit more confidence if I say yes. In chapter 12, we have then, if you scan your eyes over it, we have some public demonstrations.

So the meal in Bethany, chapter 12, verses 1 to 11, not a secret thing. I don't think, it wasn't done in the open air, but it was, people had access to that.

And we have this pouring and anointing which takes place at the meal. Then we have the donkey riding thing, which was very, very public, chapter 12, verses 12 to 19, and quite an extraordinary event.

And following that, we have a public interview, and John says that there was a voice from heaven. This is in chapter 12, verse 29.

[9 : 51] Some of the people said, no, that's not a voice from heaven, it's just thunder. And other people said, an angel had spoken. So even in those days, there were different views of the supernatural things that were going on.

And Jesus talks about all of this, and he interestingly says, in verse 35, you are going to have the light just a little while longer.

Walk while you have the light before darkness overtakes you. And there's this sense that the things that Jesus has said and done are sort of coming to an end. There won't be many more opportunities to take it on board.

There won't be many more opportunities. The window of opportunity is closing. And that's very much the sense of how things are moving in this part of the story. Much of what Jesus says after this is in private, just with his disciples.

So it's your last opportunity. opportunity. And I think we might take that point ourselves, that not all opportunities do last forever. And if you are giving God a chance, as it were, you're thinking, well, I'll one go at finding out whether God really exists or something like that.

[11:11] Take the opportunity. Don't put it off. Make this opportunity count. Do it seriously. Because just as in John's Gospel, they weren't going to have many more opportunities.

Who knows how much time you have to get things sorted out on this most important question. Now, chapter 12, it's got so many good things in it, I'd really like to talk about all of it.

But that would be very, very long. And I have to resist it. I thought chapter 12, verses 1 to 10 was a bit short, actually, but I've gone for that.

And we'll just look at the anointing in Bethany. So here we go on this section. John gives us a time marker.

He says, it's six days before the Passover. Chapter 12, verse 1. Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived at Bethany where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.

[12:18] Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honour. Martha, that's Lazarus' sister, Martha served while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him.

So I'm going to go through the sequence of events. You have to forgive my funny little drawings. But here they are. Here's the meal. So we have a table.

And we have some guests. And we have... Well, here's a person in blue whose name begins with L. Anybody like to suggest which person in the narrative that is? Lazarus. Okay, Lazarus was there. Martha. And there's somebody in the background who's doing some cooking.

It's a lady. She also has a jar with her. And her name begins with M. Martha. And the person I've done in red is the person in whose honour the meal was called.

[13:27] So it is for whom? For Jesus. And so we've got guests and the host.

Now I can tell you that in two other Gospels we have a very similar story. In fact, it's so similar that it's pretty certain they are the same.

For example, in Matthew 26. Hope I've got the reference right. In Matthew 26, verse 6. It says, While Jesus was in Bethany at the home of a man known as Simon the leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume which she poured on his head as he was reclining at the table.

When the disciples saw this they were indignant why this waste they asked. So very similar and I think we could take it that it's the same event. And I don't know whether you've noticed when I read it it tells us who the host was.

Simon. Yeah. Simon. And I think he's called Simon the leper. Whether that's a disease that he'd recovered from or what, I don't know. Well there's the scene.

[14:38] There's the meal. Let's go to the next thing that happened. So we get this controversial action. We get this controversial action.

Going back to the John version of it. It says verse 3 Then Mary took about a pint or if you do litres about half a litre of pure nard and 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.

So let's pause and think about that event. So all the people were reclining at the table. This is the way they used to eat in those days. So I've tried to get them reclining.

And Jesus is reclining at the table and Mary had this bottle of nard. It's a sort of oil. It's a sort of scented oil and it is extremely expensive.

[15:52] So how she came by half a litre of it I don't know. Whether she'd saved up and bought a teaspoonful every year for 30 years or something I don't know.

Or whether it was part of their family's perhaps the family bank account or perhaps it was her pension pot or something like that.

but it was very very expensive. And suddenly do you know how it is when if you're at home and you think I think somebody's burning some sausages are the sausages all right?

You know you suddenly get that sort of smell of something coming up and suddenly everyone goes what? They can smell this perfume that's just filled the house.

And there behind Jesus is is Martha no Mary what am I talking about?

[16 : 54] Mary so and she has broken this bottle poured it out and then she has undone her hair and wipes Jesus feet she poured it on Jesus feet and wiped his feet with her hair now in those days the women would have tied up their hair in a modest sort of way and to undo your hair would have been a very unseemly action but Mary has undone her hair and she's using it to wipe Jesus feet and it's a really strange memorable thing the smell what's she doing?

So she poured and she wiped and I don't know what people were thinking I don't know whether all the conversation stopped I don't know whether it was one of those embarrassing moments like when somebody falls over and you're not quite sure whether to pick them up or whether to ignore them in case they pick themselves up and would prefer to have thought that you hadn't noticed that they'd fallen over one of those strange sort of but the disciples or in this case Judas John focuses on Judas he has a reaction this is the same Judas the gospel writers keep on reminding us this is the one who was going to betray Jesus and he has strong objections objections 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 seems very sensible we're told his motive he didn't say it because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief as keeper of the money bag he used to help himself to what was put into it so here's his objection sell the money give it to the poor it was worth a year's wages 300 denarii a denarius is what you earn in a day so 300 of them is about a year's wages so put it's difficult to get equivalent amounts but an average wage

I think in the UK something about £25,000 if you say it might have been the average wage of somebody who was doing fairly well for themselves you might want to boost that to £35,000 or £45,000 and in one moment £25,000 worth £35,000 worth £45,000 worth of stuff is poured out and that's it it's gone not getting that back in the bottle again amazing isn't it so Judas knows the amount of money he's not saying it because he cares he used to help himself he kept the accounts for the group he was the keeper of the money bag and in some of your translations it will say he carried the money bag and in other translations it says he used to help himself to what was in it if you think of the word to lift it has you can use it both ways and that's how it is in

Greek he lifted money he carried! the bag but he lifted! he lifted! out of it and that's most likely the sense that we're to understand he helped himself he lifted money well here's his objection and here's Jesus answering verse 7 leave her alone Jesus replied it was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial you will always have the poor among you but you will not always have me I wanted to say and I forgot the opportunity to do it that perfume!

is generally a festive joyful thing to do so I'm going to put some smiley faces on there because the general meaning of pouring out perfume would be something happy and glad and there's something of a surprise in what Jesus says leave her alone it was intended that she should keep this perfume for the day of my burial it's an anointing for the day of my burial the Greeks a little bit difficult to translate you can see in the NIV there's two little right angle lines under the it was intended because there isn't a verb there it just says unto the day of my burial I think the idea of intention is a fair enough translation that's what it was for there was a purpose in it that even

[22 : 52] Mary hadn't realised so Jesus doesn't say yes she was a stupid woman well think of that money think what you could have done with that stupid woman get it back in the bottle scrape it up put it back in there he says no leave her alone what she did was absolutely right and there's a significance it's to do with the day of my burial and he goes on to say which is a bit of a scandalous thing to say you will always have the poor among you but you won't always have me which is a strange comment isn't it 25,000 pounds worth of stuff has just gone all over him and all over the floor and he says yeah that was good the right thing to do so what I want to do is bring four comments on this anointing and that's all I want to do now we've seen the story of it and read the text let me give you four comments on it it was a deliberate and rashly extravagant thing to do it was a deliberate and rashly extravagant thing to do was it her pension pot was it money that they saved up was it an

ISA or something like that I don't know but it was a lot of money a year's wages why did she do that why did she take this and just say Jesus I want this to be an anointing for you I want this to be a gift to you I want this to be for you and I want to say it was apparently a fruitless thing to do it wasn't an investment she get no payback she get no visible results from it it was simply a gift to Jesus an extravagant gift to Jesus and Jesus said yep that's right I accept extravagant gifts I'm the sort of person that warrants extravagant gifts and she's not stupid leave her alone isn't that amazing why

did she do it well

I don't know it doesn't say she obviously cared a lot for Jesus I would like to take us to one of the parallel passages which I think is a different incident in Luke chapter 7 I don't think these are the same cast of people but it's similar and I'll read you what it says in Luke 7 verse well I'll tell you from verse 36 one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him so he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table when a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house she bought an alabaster jar of perfume and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping she began to wet his feet with her tears she wiped them with her hair kissed them and poured perfume on them it's very similar isn't it and this gets discussed and in verse 47 Jesus says she poured perfume on my feet therefore

I tell you her many sins have been forgiven for she loved much but he who has forgiven who has been forgiven little loves little and I want to suggest well certainly the other woman loved Jesus so much because she was conscious that she'd been forgiven so much she was conscious you see of the magnitude of her how wrong she was and how much she'd screwed up her life and how fully and completely Jesus could forgive her and had forgiven her and just the wonder of that the amazement of it the fact of this great burden on her conscience gone the fact of this stain on her conscience wiped clean was such an impression on her that she loved Jesus so much that the tears rolled down her cheeks and nothing was too much trouble and she makes this offering of gratitude to Jesus and she loved him much because she was forgiven so much and I'd like to suggest that that's at least a good insight into

Mary in Bethany and I'd like to ask you what Jesus means to you and if you're a Christian I know that you have asked Jesus for forgiveness but I want to say to you as I say it to myself how much is that part of our ongoing relationship with Jesus is the preciousness of forgiven sin as precious to us now as it used to be is it something that in our hearts is fresh and real and might even bring tears to our eyes even as we think of it that the Lord has forgiven us and it seems to me if we're still making that connection which we jolly well ought to be then we will love him correspondingly because the alternative is like

[28 : 46] Judas and Judas version of it was irrelevant can't see the point no percentage in it doesn't achieve anything anyway he didn't really want it to achieve anything because he was really thinking of the percentage he could rake off if he handled the account and here's Judas who sees this in a mean way in a calculating way in a hard hearted way in a me first way so I asked the question what does Jesus mean to us here's my second point this fragrance spread around and I want to stop on that point the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume it's a beautiful thought isn't it that suddenly the whole atmosphere changes literally and the idea of things spreading is not a million miles away from lots that's going on in this chapter so in verse 9 the news spreads 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 the sense that the interest spread or the attractiveness spread and in verse 12 the next day so this is the next day i.e.

the day of Jesus entering Jerusalem the next day the great crowd that had come for the feast heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem what's happening today there's a big thing happening what is it there's a big procession what's the procession is that guy Jesus so the news about Jesus spread we've got to be there what time is it can we get there yeah we can and then in verse 19 the Pharisees are conscious that it's spreading the Pharisees that's one of the one of the groups in Jewish society or the stricter groups and the Pharisees said to one another see this is getting us nowhere see the whole world has gone after him everybody's hearing about this and still on that idea of spreading in chapter 12 verse 32 Jesus himself says I will draw all not necessarily men men and women I will draw all to myself and he says that's what happens when I'm lifted up from the earth and you think Jesus must be speaking in riddles all the time and he did speak in riddles in a sense but that one is not such a difficult riddle being lifted up from the earth he's talking about his crucifixion when I'm crucified

I'll draw people people will hear about it it will spread it will bring people it'll be like this aroma really that fills the world with something beautiful that the world has never heard before and you might have caught a whiff of it yourself you might have caught a whiff of what are wonderful beautiful if only that were true and it is true of what Jesus did when he died on the cross I'm not going to dogmatize and say that is the meaning of the fragrance spreading but I'm going to say it's a very

beautiful and suggestive picture and in fact it's a picture that the apostle Paul uses in 2 Corinthians 2 when he talks about his work as a missionary as a gospel speaker as an ambassador if you like for Jesus Christ in 2 Corinthians 2 verse 14 and onwards he says this 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 among those who are perishing to the one with the smell of death to the other the fragrance of life who's equal to such a task I'll just point out the similarity this spreading this aroma this fantastic fragrance fragrance it's the fragrance like the fragrance that the message of Jesus Christ brings and if we could see it with God's eyes we might have a sense of that that like this past week where people have gone out onto London Road and given out little pieces of paper and had conversations and you might think well that doesn't achieve very much what's that just takes up a few hours of time but God says well what I see there was almost like that bottle being broken [34 : 03] I see the wafting of a fragrance into London Road into Brighton maybe into your life maybe it got up your nostrils and you smelt a bit of that fragrance Paul says we are to God the aroma of Christ so it's not only the gospel activity but gospel people we have an aroma I won't go down that but spiritually speaking Paul says we are to God the aroma of Christ some people smell the smell of Christ about us and it disgusts them it's the stench of death and other people smell the smell and they think there's something rather I don't know can't put my finger on it something rather something about that the aroma of Christ I suppose I could say what aroma do you take around with you third observation it was an action with an unintended and unrealized significance now I think that

Mary meant it as a joyful compliment to Jesus a gift but Jesus says that there was an intention this perfume was saved for the day of my burial and the NIV as I said includes the words it was intended which I think gives us the right idea now I've been puzzling about this and I don't think I fully understand it certainly well let's start off I don't think Mary understood it either it's one of the things about John's gospel that he often says they didn't understand it at the time they were going why did Jesus do that what's he on about and only later when Jesus had died on the cross and was risen again did they say oh of course oh it's an interesting feature isn't it it sort of adds to the historical believability of it because it shows us how stupid the disciples were at the time pretty much like us I suppose they're very believable people and it's only afterwards that they understood it I think this would be true for what Mary did Jesus says there was a purpose in it for the day of her burial! Mary is thinking I didn't know that well perfume was used in terms of burial so when Lazarus died you might find it just across in chapter 11 verse 38 no verse 39 by this time there is a bad odour says the NIV for he's been there he's been dead four days the aroma of decomposition so there is a connection between perfume and death and that's the connection that Jesus makes but I don't know why he does it in the sense that his body didn't decay he was buried definitely he was crucified for our sins according to the scriptures he was buried and on the third day he rose from the dead according to the scriptures but the thing was that he didn't decay he rose again from the dead and that's one of the points that

Peter makes on the day of Pentecost seeing what was ahead David prophesied of the resurrection of Christ that he was not abandoned to the grave nor did his body see decay but even though the anointing of the burial wasn't necessary to prevent decay yet it was a right honour and respectful treatment for Jesus' body which in the end he barely got did he because it was so rushed at the end they didn't have a proper they didn't lay him to rest properly it was all done in a big rush by men who probably don't know how to do these things properly and you remember the women came to the grave to try and sort it out the mess that the men had made of it but Jesus is saying that respectful treatment yeah that's right that's the significance and of course let's not forget that

[38 : 48] Jesus is thinking obviously of what is coming everybody is saying oh they're all cheering you Lord it's all going very well and Jesus is saying well actually in just a few days time they'll be crying for my death and I'll be put on trial and although there's no evidence against me I'll be found guilty and I'll be dead and my burial will be rushed he's seeing all this ahead and let me add in one other connection which is a bit of a tenuous connection that the word Messiah means anointed one that's what they did to kings in English coronations the big thing is the crown there is an anointing as well but in those in that society the big thing was the anointing and the anointed one

Hebrew Messiah the Greek version of it is the Christ and here's another thought the only time that Jesus got anywhere close to being anointed with special oil was this the closest thing and he got

this bizarre coincidence of two thoughts that he's the king who's anointed but he's anointed in the style of a burial but Jesus says don't tell her off there's a significance to this and it's a right significance here's my fourth and final point this action is completely focused on Jesus himself it's completely focused on Jesus and you noticed that there was a conflict apparently a conflict between

Jesus and the needs of the poor so Jesus is saying the needs of the poor come first we're Christians we care about the needs of the poor we care about social action that's what comes first and Jesus says well that may be but on this particular occasion I come first he says you always have the opportunity to do stuff for the poor but you don't always have the opportunity to do this for me and I think this says something about the magnitude of Jesus please note that the Bible is not minimizing the needs of the poor in Matthew 19 21 a rich man was told to sell all you have and give it to the poor minimizing that but what it is is maximizing Jesus can you imagine in any other person this would be sheer arrogance wouldn't it take that money that you were going to give to Oxfam give it to me because I'm more important but that's what Jesus does it's one of these wonderful occasions where Jesus just says something which makes you draw job draw job jaw drop is what I meant to say makes your jaw drop that's what I meant to say and he just carries on as if he'd said nothing particularly unusual but look at the magnitude of Jesus I am more important than the needs of the poor at this particular focus on me and I point out that Christians need reminding of this because Christians can be so caught up with this scheme and that scheme and this venture and that venture and they can give themselves to it wholeheartedly whether it's working with children or whatever it might be and you get so busy doing these things that our eyes move from Jesus who is the person we're doing it for and we just get caught up with all the stuff we're doing and I think this story focuses again on the fact that the Lord of the work is greater than that's what that sign means is greater than is definitely greater than the work of the

Lord that the Christian life is not lived vis-a-vis action vis-a-vis money vis-a-vis time and energy the Christian life is lived for the Lord and that will mean action money time effort but it's first and foremost the Lord Christians live for the Lord we live to the Lord we live in the Lord we live by the Lord the Christian life is entirely Christ centred Christ focused and maybe Jesus might be saying to us hold on a minute what about me you're forgetting me I'm the centre of this aren't I I'm supposed to be at the middle of this have you ever looked into my face have you ever stopped and talked to me about this have you ever bothered to listen to what

[44 : 35] I'm saying the complete focus on the Lord those are my four points just to repeat them by way of conclusion this woman has a radical devotion to the Lord Jesus that's a great example and an inspiration for us the thing that she did spread and it was worth spreading and it showed that there was something going on the news was worth hearing and worth hearing about this focus on Jesus is totally right he deserves it that's the magnitude of who he is he doesn't make a big he doesn't make a big song and dance about it but like all the way through the gospels Jesus just is a towering wonderful humble magnificent figure and my fourth point which I only just made was it's entirely focused on

Jesus and I ask are you would you like to be we're going to close by singing a song number 415 5