

AM Mark 14:1-11 Beauty amid the gathering storm

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[0 : 0 0] 14. Mark's Gospel, chapter 14. We're reading verses 1 to 11. This is so encouraging because so often nowadays in churches, Bibles are not there.

So bless you for still having Bibles with you. Bibles are there but nobody picks them up. And the only scripture that people see is what's projected on the screen on a Sunday morning. How can we possibly know about the Lord if we don't open his word and read it for ourselves? So let's read Mark 14 starting at verse 1 through to verse 11.

It was now two days before the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest him by stealth and kill him.

For they said, Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar from the people. And while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he was reclining at the table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly.

[1 : 2 7] And she broke the flask and poured it over his head. There were some who said to themselves indignantly, Why was this ointment wasted like this?

For this ointment could have been sold for more than 300 denarii and given to the poor. And they scolded her. But Jesus said, Leave her alone.

Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you. And whenever you want, you can do good for them.

But you will not always have me. She has done what she could. She has anointed my body beforehand for burial. And truly I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her.

Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. And when they heard it, they were glad and promised to give him money.

[2 : 4 1] And he sought an opportunity to betray him. Thank God for his word. One thing I plead before the Lord, and this I seek always, that I may come within God's house and dwell there all my days.

That on the beauty of the Lord I constantly may gaze, and in his house may seek to know direction in his ways.

This morning's address I've entitled, Beauty Amid the Gathering Storm. Have you ever had a feeling or feelings of impending loss?

It's a feeling that causes anxiety and sadness, which you feel in the very core of who you are. It might be prompted by the seeming inevitable breakdown of a relationship, which you feel helpless to avert, or perhaps the impending death of someone you love very deeply.

As I read today's Bible passage, it occurred to me that except for the Lord Jesus, only one other person seems to have a real appreciation of the unfolding situation.

[4 : 1 7] See that during the final week of the earthly life of the Lord Jesus Christ, the clouds were indeed gathering. We read in verse 1 that the chief priests and scribes were seeking how to arrest Jesus by stealth in order to kill him.

Thousands of other pilgrims would have been travelling to Jerusalem for the Passover. They would have been full of joy at the opportunity to go and celebrate this feast.

Jesus, in contrast, was preparing for the ordeal of his trial, his crucifixion and his death. Jesus steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem in order to do his Father's will.

We read earlier in Luke's Gospel, Luke 9 verse 51, when the day drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.

And despite the fact that Jesus, on a number of occasions, told his disciples that he must suffer many things, be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed and after

three days rise again, the disciples from their actions and reactions had neither understood nor were they sensitive to these gathering clouds.

[5 : 48] Mark 8 verse 31. Jesus entered Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday to the rapturous acclaim of the crowds. He taught the people in the temple courts.

However, the Jewish leaders did not attempt to arrest him with so many people around. Verse 2. We can't arrest him during the feast, lest there be an uproar from the people, they said.

Jesus was popular, and many gathered to listen to him. And then in the evenings, he and the disciples would leave Jerusalem and go to Bethany, which was about two miles outside the city. And it was here that he's anointed. We're told, we read that Jesus and his friend, including Lazarus, and his two sisters, Martha and Mary, and as Mark describes this event, what took place stands in sharp contrast to the conniving hatred of the religious leaders.

A colleague called Tom Glover in his commentary writes, wedged between hatred of the enemy and treachery of a friend, this beautiful story displays an extravagance of love.

[7 : 16] This incident takes place at the home of a man known as Simon the leper. At the time of Jesus' earthly ministry, leprosy was a terrible disease which resulted in sufferers being excluded from society and also excluded from corporate worship.

Paula and I have spent a number of holidays in Crete and have visited an island called Spinalonga, which was for many years a leper colony. It's off the island at the east end of Crete.

In fact, there's a lovely little book called *The Island*. I'm not promoting, what's her name? I'm not going to be a little bit of a man. I'm not going to be a little bit of a man. I'm not going to be a little bit of a man. Victoria Hislop. But it is a good book to read and it's an insight into leprosy.

And at the time that the Lord was here, leprosy, if you had leprosy, then you were cast out. Now, as I read this passage, I wondered whether Simon the leper was so named because Jesus secured him of his leprosy.

I mean, we don't know. But it doesn't hurt to wonder. And then we have this wonderful act of worship, this anointing of the Lord Jesus.

[8 : 30] We read in the passage that a woman who the Apostle John describes as Mary, the sister of Lazarus and Martha, enters the dining room during the celebratory meal with an expensive jar of perfume described as a pound of nard.

This is called spikenard today. It's an amber-coloured essential oil derived from a flowering plant of the valerian family which grows in the Himalayas of Nepal, China and India.

So this would have come from that part of the world. John tells us that Martha, Mary's sister, was serving the meal. This was always Martha, wasn't it?

Always busy doing something. She was serving the meal. Lazarus, who the Lord had raised from the dead, is sitting at the table along with the other guests.

That must have caused a hubbub of conversation. And so John tells us that this dinner was given in honour of Jesus.

[9 : 44] John 12, verse 2. So Mary takes this alabaster jar of perfume, she breaks the top of it, and she pours the contents on the head and feet of the Lord.

In this reading, it's the head, but in the John's account, it's the feet. She poured this ointment on the head and feet of the Lord. There's no doubt that this jar of perfume, which the disciples valued at more than the average man's wage for an entire year, was brought by Mary to Jesus as a love gift. Mary loved the Lord. In the past, she sat at Jesus' feet listening to his teaching. Mary had criticised her sister for not helping in the preparation of food for their guests.

But Jesus said that Mary had chosen the good portion which will not be taken from her. Luke 10, 42. For the past seven years, I've been a volunteer with NHS and Fries and Galloway.

I was doing this while I was associate pastor at the Baptist Church and I've continued to do it now that I am retired. And as a result of this link into patient...

[11 : 05] Let's just explain a little bit about patient listening. We all have times where we suffer loss in one form or another.

There are people with addictions, gambling, drugs, alcohol. There are people with all kinds of problems and they go to see the doctor and they're looking for the doctor to give them a pill that can sort out their problems.

And if the doctor discerns that this patient might better be helped by having someone to listen to their story, then they refer them to someone like me.

I'm not a counsellor, but I have been trained to be a listener. And the value that listening to someone else gives that person is amazing.

And so because of the work I was doing with the listening service, when COVID kicked off, I was invited to go and be part of the chaplaincy team at Dumfries and Galloway Royal Infirmary.

[12:10] I've learned that we all listen at different levels. There are times when we barely listen. We might catch something of what the other person is saying, but we're too caught up in our own thoughts and cares to truly listen and hear what that person is saying.

On other occasions, we listen but through our own filters and values so that we hear what's being said, but all the time we're considering our response or we're making value judgments based on our own beliefs so that it's more about us than it is about the person who's speaking.

This could be happening even now as we listen to this sermon. It's always good and right to listen carefully and discerningly but not at the expense of missing the message because of our own beliefs and prejudices.

And then there's active listening. That's what Mary did when she sat at Jesus' feet. Mary actively listened to the Lord.

There's another meal that Jesus attended at the home of Simon the Pharisee. Jesus said to Simon, because they were all poo-pooing this woman, she's a sinner.

[13:33] We don't want anything to do with her. If the Lord was really who he says he is, then he would know that she's a sinner. What's he doing? Jesus said to Simon, do you see this woman?

Do you really see this woman? Or have you already preached, judged this woman to the point where you've discarded her? And I think there's a danger for ourselves as believers to sometimes react in that way to people that we believe are beyond the pale.

Believe me, the vilest offender who truly believes that moment from Jesus a pardon receives. We believe this, don't we?

So no one is beyond the pale. Active listening places value on the person who's speaking. and it's amazing how important it can be and the impact that it can have.

So I believe that Mary really listened and heard what Jesus taught. She was also sensitive to the current overall situation and was aware that in fact the clouds were gathering.

[14:48] She loved Jesus and she wanted to express her love for him. John writes that after the death of her brother Lazarus Mary fell at Jesus' feet.

She witnessed Jesus raising her brother Lazarus from the dead an act for which she was truly grateful. John 11 32 following. Speaking words of love can sometimes be cheap.

Words come easily at times that Mary's love and gratitude was active. It was practical and it was sacrificial. This anointing of Jesus was also an act of extravagant worship and adoration.

Mary sensed something of the impending trial and sacrifice that Jesus would make. Her actions were well planned and well intended. This anointing of Jesus' head and feet the aroma of which would have carried into the coming week in a sense prepared Jesus' body for burial.

Mary showed her love for Jesus while he was still alive while there was still the opportunity to show her love for him. So it's little wonder then that Jesus describes her actions as beautiful.

[16:18] She has done a beautiful thing for me. Mark 14 verse 6. So I ask myself what are some of the lessons we can learn from Mary and her love and devotion to Jesus.

Do we pay attention to Jesus' words in the way that Mary did? Do we spend time, quality time on a regular basis in communion with and listening to the Lord God, by his spirit and through his word?

Do our actions express both our love for Jesus and our love for others in a real practical and tangible way? Mary in gratitude and love gave her most valued and treasured possession in order to anoint Jesus.

Everyone present at that meal would have enjoyed the aroma which would have filled the entire house. But this anointing was for Jesus. This was Mary's expression of love for our Lord.

C.H. Spurgeon wrote, the beauty of this woman's act consisted in this, that it was all for Christ. Christ. Perhaps Mary's generous expression of love might prompt some of us to demonstrate our love for Jesus by expressing our love meaningfully to someone in our circle of influence.

[17:52] And perhaps we ought to think about that and do it while we still have the opportunity. Perhaps it's time to be reconciled to an elderly relative or a friend expressing our love for them while they're still with us.

Perhaps it's showing our love by an act of kindness that might help someone else feel loved and special. I don't know if you're aware, but at least two of the larger tells in town are mainly occupied by Ukrainian refugees.

Did you know that? This is part of the Scottish Government Super Sponsor Scheme and it's different from the main scheme where people are found, hosts are found to host families.

People have come from a traumatised part of the world with their children and apparently there's a number of men also and they're given shelter and they're given three meals a day, but how do they get from there to integrating into the society here in Scotland where they can begin to have a meaningful life?

There's not enough sponsors to meet the need, so is that an area that we might consider? So what about the reaction of the others in this story?

[19:18] There were some present who said to themselves indignantly, why was this ointment wasted like this? For this ointment could have been sold for more than 300 denarii and given to the poor and they scolded her.

They scolded Mary for this act of love. The word indignant means outraged, showing anger and annoyance and Jesus in turn rebukes them.

Leave her alone, he said. Why do you trouble her? She's done a beautiful thing to me. But as we read on, it would appear that this event is the catalyst that brings Judas and the chief priests together.

See, the one thing that Judas apparently could not tolerate was such wholehearted devotion to Jesus, with no other motive than love for him. Sadly, Judas was one of these religious people whose interest in Jesus was connected more towards what Jesus could do for him than what he could do in service of his Lord.

Remember JFK famously said, ask not what your country can do for you, rather ask what you can do for your country. And I believe the same applies in our service to the Lord.

[20:39] God loves you. God's given the very best he had to save you. Our response surely should be one of love and compassion for other people that makes a difference in the world.

Judas sadly was the treasurer, we're told, of the funds that funded Jesus' ministry. And he had his hand in the bag.

John 12 verse 6. Together with some of the other disciples he was caught up in material things and the value of money. Why was the ointment wasted like that?

They asked. The harassment, the disciples, the harshness of the response to Mary's apparent extravagance would appear to underline their hard heartedness and perhaps also the poverty of their own devotion to Jesus.

It could be argued that by overvaluing the perfume they were in effect devaluing their Lord. Was Jesus not worth such extravagance?

[21:51] Jesus states that poor people will always be with us and this is true today as it was the day Jesus made these comments. And we can and should help those who are poor whenever possible.

But Jesus knew that his time here on earth was limited, that he would soon be unlawfully killed and buried. And concerning Mary's sacrificial gift he said, she has done what she could.

She has anointed my body beforehand for burial. And truly I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the world, what she's done will be told in memory of her.

And here we are over 2,000 years later, remembering this extravagant act of love. In John, sorry, in verse 10 Judas is described in two ways.

Firstly, he's described as one of the 12, and secondly as a betrayer. Do any of you know Geoffrey Grogan? No? Well, Geoffrey Grogan was a huge help to me when I was at college.

[23:01] His sins passed into glory. But he was, there was some teaching going around at the time that I was at college called open theism, which basically argues that we can change God's mind, that without us, God doesn't know what to do next, which is absolute heresy.

And thankfully, Geoffrey Grogan had written a book on this and other subjects just prior to his death, and so I went with a colleague to visit him, and it was such a blessing to spend time with such a godly man.

And Geoffrey Grogan wrote, to be one of the twelve, this is concerning Judas, to be one of the twelve to spend months on the road with Jesus, to hear his words, to watch his works of love and

power, and most of all to contemplate his character, to be so close to Jesus physically, and yet to be so very far from him spiritually.

What a horror this is. Judas didn't see who Jesus really is. How sad.

What a terrible combination. One of those, Jesus chose to have become a traitor. It's been said that Judas closed himself to the love of God expressed in Christ.

[24 : 19] He was paid twelve pieces of silver as the price of betrayal, and this is the amount that might have been paid for a slave in those days. And by agreeing to the price, Judas sold his own soul, and insisted instead of being free, remained a slave to sin, and ultimately led to a very tragic end.

What a contrast, what a contrast in this passage. Mary gave her best in faith and love. Judas gave his worst in unbelief and treachery.

So let's bring these thoughts to a conclusion. The title of this morning's message is beauty amid the gathering storm. And it's interesting to note that approximately one third of Mark's gospel focuses on the last week of Jesus' earthly life, and much of this on his death and resurrection.

Tomb's empty. Christ is risen. Hallelujah. That's the hope that we have. The atoning sacrifice of Jesus was an act of propitiation for the sin of us all, in that the perfect, sinless Son of God bore our sin in his body and bled and died in our place instead on the cross of Calvary.

The Apostle Paul wrote, And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you've heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and for which I, Paul, am a minister.

[26 : 15] Colossians 1, 21-23. Mary was sensitive to the impending arrest and death of Jesus. She was aware that he would not be with them for much longer, so she did what she could.

C.T. Studd was a wealthy businessman and a very successful cricketer who lived between 1860 and 1931. He elected to give his considerable wealth away in order to meet the needs of others.

Why? Because whilst contemplating a painting of the crucifixion, he thought to himself, if Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for him.

Mary had a close, devoted relationship with the Lord. She spent quality time sitting at his feet and listening to him teach, and she was not ashamed to show her love openly.

Jesus had restored her brother Lazarus to life, and Mary expressed her love and gratitude to Jesus in this extravagant anointing.

[27 : 31] As believers this morning, we are the recipients of the priceless gift of salvation. We've been brought from death to life. We were dead, says Ephesians, dead in our sins and without hope.

But through the blood of Christ, we become children of the living God. This sin and of itself should prompt us to Christ-centered devotion and love, which should then be extended to others.

How sad it is that so near the arrest and death of Jesus, some of the disciples seem to live so much of their lives grudgingly. Their attitude indicates that despite the lengthy exposure to Jesus' character and witnessing the miracles, not to mention being sent out by Jesus themselves to minister, they understood all too little of the love that Jesus has for sinners.

Do we have grateful hearts today? Hearts that are moved to give the very best of all that we have and all that we are as an expression of love for Jesus?

So we're blessed to live this side of the cross of Calvary. So may we recommit ourselves to neither holding back nor turning back in our Christian walk.

[28 : 51] And may we carry with us something of the fragrance and beauty of our Saviour who gave us everything for us.

Choose Christ, choose life. Amen. Amen.