

Matthew 26 (Pre-communion)

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[0 : 00] And I'd like for a short time this evening to focus particularly, but not exclusively, on verses 6 to 13, the account of the anointing of Jesus at Bethany by, as Matthew tells us here, verse 7, a woman.

It so happened that the day I was preparing this particular sermon was Thursday, Thursday that happened to be International Women's Day, the day when women's rights, women's achievements were recognised throughout the world.

No one's of course going to deny such rights, rights such as women's suffrage, women's working rights, women's contribution to society, to many aspects of civil life, whether we're talking about time of war or time of peace.

But you know, in all the media coverage of that particular day, I don't think any one of us, I didn't see anything about one woman who played a crucial part, a crucial role in the preparation of Jesus for his death.

Of course, that woman here is unnamed by Matthew, deliberately so, and we'll see for reasons why. But she's named in John's account of this same episode, she's Mary of Bethany.

[1 : 26] She's Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. This is the same Mary who, remember, sat at Jesus' feet when Jesus was with Martha and Mary.

And this Mary, this Mary of Bethany is now doing something that Matthew tells us here is beautiful, beautiful to Jesus, literally a good work, a noble work.

This woman and her work, this woman should be remembered for what she did at this particular meal, at this particular time in Jesus' preparation for his death.

And therefore it's for you and I to take this time to remember, this time as a preparation to remember the Lord's death, when tomorrow we together have a simple meal, the Lord's supper.

So let's just focus in then on the passage. Let's look at the background firstly, because here's Matthew, he's recording Jesus' last moments before Jesus' betrayal and his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, of course before Jesus' crucifixion.

[2 : 44] And Matthew's already been writing of Jesus' awareness of the imminence of his giving his life for sinners. Jesus' crucifixion.

Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus' crucifixion. That chapter 26, Jesus is very aware he's about to be crucified. And notice at the start of chapter 26, he links his crucifixion with Passover.

With that time, remember that the Jews celebrated annually, commemorating the time in Egypt when the Lord passed over the houses of the Israelites who daubed the lintels, the doorposts, with the blood of a lamb.

And now the Lamb of God is about to give his life to the sake of sinners for whom he's come to die. So you see that connection immediately at the start of chapter 26.

But what else do we notice in the way that Matthew brings this information out? We see how verse 6 to verse 13, this beautiful act that's recorded here, the anointing of Jesus, is placed in the middle, in between two acts of evil.

[4 : 05] On the one hand, you see the first five verses, the plotting of Jesus, the conspiracy of Caiaphas and the chief priests and the elders to arrest Jesus and to kill him.

And then you jump down to verse 14 and you see Judas Iscariot deliberating, deciding to go to these chief priests and to betray Jesus.

So what we've seen here, we're seeing Matthew highlighting the sheer beauty of devotion to Jesus, centered in this single act of this unnamed woman.

You know, on the one hand, you've got Caiaphas, who's named. You've got, in addition to Caiaphas, you've got these high-ranking officials in the Jewish church or the synagogue.

And then you've got Judas Iscariot named, one of the disciples of Jesus. But notice, as Matthew tells us here, it's this unnamed woman, this woman who would have been regarded as a second-class citizen in Jewish society.

[5 : 11] It's this unnamed woman who stands out in her true closeness to Jesus. This woman, despised by many in society, in Jewish society, yet honoured by Jesus because of her true devotion to Jesus, because of her costly acts of service to the Savior at this particular moment in Jesus' life.

We're seeing this light shining in the midst of darkness. And you know, in a world, the world we're living in, the society that we're living in, for so many would seek to silence the word of Jesus and silence the voice of gospel truth.

It's for you to shine your light in amongst the darkness of the world around. It's for you to remain steadfast in your witness for the Savior. It's for you, yes, to not to hide your light, but to let your light shine through Jesus' sense of service.

Others will see it, so that you proclaim the Lord Jesus as your Savior. But what else do we see here in this, the way that Matthew brings out the anointing of Jesus?

It must have been said that the forces of evil are all around Jesus. And these last earthly moments of Jesus' life, these moments just shortly before his betrayal and arrest and then trial and crucifixion, as we say, Jesus is surrounded by forces of evil.

[6 : 44] And at that hour, that hour when Jesus' public ministry is about to end, there's Jesus being stopped by the evil one. And all the forces of Satan seeking to repress Jesus.

But it's a futile attempt, it's that futile attempt to divert Jesus from his mission and bring salvation to his own. And there's Jesus in the midst of it all. Jesus will not be diverted from his mission.

Jesus knows that his death, his substitutionary death for sinners, death is going to happen very, very soon.

He's not going to turn back. Despite all the forces of hell combining to unleash their venom against Jesus, Jesus' face is set towards Calvary. And just ponder that in your time of preparation this evening.

Just reflect as you prepare to remember the Lord's death in your participation in the supper tomorrow. Just dwell on that fact that Jesus' face was set firmly to Calvary.

[7 : 57] Yes, Jesus was very aware of the plotting and the scheming against him. He's aware of Caiaphas in the one hand and Judas Iscariot in the other. He knows the conspiracy that's happening.

He knows all the power of humanity is against him. But Jesus doesn't yield to these forces because he's looking steadfastly to the cross.

Jesus will be the sin bearer. He will be the once for all sacrifice for sin. So there's the prospect of the cross before Jesus. Yes, all that horror awaits him, the horror of sin bearing.

Jesus is obedient. Even as that dark cloud is hovering over him. And you know, as you prepare this evening to participate in the Lord's Supper, in your preparation, may there be gratitude in your heart.

May there be that thankfulness, that constant thankfulness towards the Lord Jesus. For thanking him that he wasn't deflected by the evil one who would seek to destroy Jesus.

[9 : 11] May there be thankfulness in my heart, as in your heart, that he did it for you. That Jesus was prepared to suffer for you, to die for you.

So that you might not suffer and know eternal death. So, focus on the Lord Jesus. Focus on the Saviour. Focus on his willingness to give his life for you.

To be that willing sacrifice for sin. And to enable us to focus on the Lord Jesus. To see the Saviour in all his steadfastness and his willingness to die on the cross.

We have this little story of this woman, Mary of Bethany. This act of this woman at this particular house, this house of Simon the Lepo.

So, this account is there to help us. To see the wonder of Christ's sacrifice for us. Now, when we look at the incident itself, we can see, we can use our imagination, we can see this tranquil occasion.

[10 : 24] I mean, very much the cultural norms of togetherness and friendship and community are there at that house. So, through Scripture we've been unable to go into that room.

We're seeing Jesus dine with his friends, with his companions. Even the very fact, as it were, of going into this room through Scripture is helping us in our preparation for this simple meal tomorrow.

I pray that there will be that togetherness and friendship and community amongst the Lord's people as we share in that time of remembering the Lord's death till he comes.

But of course it's much more than culture. It has to be. And it has to be much, much more than any kind of forced sense of, you know, having to be there or even some kind of force of habit.

No, surely you and I will be there out of love. Love for our Saviour. Love one for another. Why? Because of the love of Christ.

[11 : 29] Because of the love of him who gave himself for you so that you might know that fellowship with him and that fellowship one with another. You will express that fellowship in the shared cup, in the shared loaf.

You will express that fellowship that's an expression of the Church of Christ. You will be showing forth in the taking of the bread and the wine.

You will be proclaiming that you are part of the blood-bought Church of Christ, that you, within the Church, the Church of the Lord Jesus, the Church was its life.

You owe your life to the one who gave his life for you. What do we notice in this anointing?

Well, a number of things. We notice two responses to Jesus. Because, you know, as we think of the sacrifice of Jesus, of course we have to.

[12 : 28] That has to be uppermost in our minds on this particular occasion of preparation, the sacrifice of Jesus. But what is your sacrificial giving for Jesus? Because if the Lord's Supper is an occasion to remember the cost of your salvation, well, remember too, it's what we call a strengthening ordinance.

The Lord's Supper is given to you to strengthen your faith, to impel you to that greater devotion to your Lord and Savior. So, look at the example of Mary of Bethany here.

This woman who poured that expensive oil in Jesus' hand. Are you going to give to the Lord sacrificially in response to, not just obviously the woman giving sacrificially, but are you going to give sacrificially in response to the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus?

Or am I going to balk at the cost of my discipleship? Or am I going to hold back in giving of myself for the one who gave himself fully for me?

Well, look at the sacrificial giving to Jesus by this woman, by Mary. What do we notice? Verse 7, we notice that she comes to Jesus with his alabaster flask, this jar of very expensive ointment, this liquid ointment.

[13 : 53] And then, of course, it's broken, that's it. It's all poured out in Jesus. There's nothing going to be kept back for any other occasion. It's going to cost her a lot in financial terms.

That jar, once it's broken, everything's poured from inside into Jesus' hand. But notice she gives gladly. It's to her Lord and Savior that she's honoring.

Now, you know, again, we come back to the culture of the day. And the culture of the day was such that this was not an unusual practice, it's the pouring of oil on a guest's hand.

Hey, this was a mark of respect. In this case, this is different. Because this oil was very expensive. This oil was reserved for special occasions.

We said once poured, it could be never used again. So, we see by her action, by Mary's action, that Mary was showing a complete, full honoring of Jesus.

[14 : 56] This wordless action that showed that no cost was too great for her to give for Jesus because of the cost, the sacrificial cost, that Jesus was about to pay for her salvation.

Because as Isaiah tells us, he poured out his soul unto death. As Mary poured out that oil in Jesus' hand, she was pointing forward to the pouring out of Jesus' soul, even unto death.

You know, when you consider the cost that Jesus paid for your salvation, you can't approach the Lord's table unless you do so with gratitude and with love.

You know, when you take your place at the table tomorrow, this area tomorrow, well, remember the cost. Remember the cost that Jesus paid for your salvation.

Remember the love that Jesus showed you, that eternal love that Jesus showed you in his giving of himself for you. So that when you take that bread, you're remembering the cost to Jesus and his broken body for you.

[16 : 10] When you put that cup to your lips, you'll be remembering the cost of Jesus' shed blood. Blood poured out for you. Tomorrow we'll be looking much more closely at these particular aspects of the bread and the wine.

But you're remembering, you'll be resolved to live for him in that costly grace, that grace, that giving, that denies yourself, that takes up your cross, if you follow Jesus.

Because otherwise, otherwise, you'll just fall into that trap of looking merely on the outward form. You'll just look at the outward as significant and not see the beauty of that sacrifice that's required in the believer's life of service.

I mean, look at the disciples' reaction to Mary's pouring out that oil in Jesus' head. You know, they're indignant. Now, in one sense, the reaction was understandable.

I mean, these are men, mostly anyway, men from, mostly men from poor backgrounds. Extravagance to them were very much alien to their experience and their expectations.

[17 : 25] That pouring of all that oil in Jesus, well, it was considered to them unnecessary, are we? I mean, their estimation of priority was that the money that was spent, the oil could have been spent, and the poor.

Now, in one sense, praiseworthy. In one sense. But not in this instance. Because the context is crucial. Because the context is Jesus.

Jesus said, the poor you'll always have with you. There'll always be, Jesus says, opportunities to help the poor. But in this particular circumstance of Jesus, this unique situation, as Jesus is preparing for his atoning death and burial, resurrection, some of the disciples got it all wrong.

Mary did what was beautiful. Mary did what was noble in anointing Jesus for his burial. We'll come back to that in a moment. But, you know, each one of us has to ask.

I have to ask. You have to ask in the honesty of our hearts. What's your response? What's my response? In terms of giving of self for Jesus?

[18 : 39] You know, the world sees it as a waste when Christians give of our time, of our resources for the Lord's work. Whether it's even the very practical things like refurbishing a building, maintaining the Lord's work in a particular congregation.

The world says, what a waste. Sometimes even in the church itself we have that attitude just as the disciples reveal here. But a costly giving of ourselves, a costly giving of all that the Lord has given to us is only possible when we recognize the true worth of Jesus.

When we recognize who Jesus is. That Jesus is worthy. Worthy of all praise. Worthy of all our gratitude. Worthy of all our thankfulness. Worthy of costly giving of ourselves.

Rather than of holding back. You may even this type of preparation help us to see to be the more invigorated in a costly giving of self for the one who gave himself fully and wholly for us.

We mentioned just a second ago recognizing Jesus and we have to see here too this true recognition of Jesus. Because we have to see here Mary truly did recognize Jesus.

[19 : 57] Here's Mary anointing Jesus. Doing so, notice, before his burial. Somehow, we don't know how, but somehow Mary knew that Jesus had to come.

She's pouring oil in Jesus' hand. She's recognizing that Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed one. She's recognizing that Jesus is the one promise in Scripture of the anointed one of God.

In the Old Testament, kings were anointed. priests were anointed. And here's Mary recognizing in Jesus as truly the Christ, the Messiah, the anointed one who came, has come to take away the sin of the world.

Caiaphas, the high priest, all the chief priests, they didn't recognize Jesus. Jesus Iscariot didn't recognize Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

but Mary had this insight into who Jesus is, the one sent from heaven to free his people from the consequences of sin.

[21 : 14] Do you recognize Jesus? Well, you, by faith, have been given eyes to see the one who gave his life for you. you've been given that faith to see the promised Christ, to see the Lord of glory, the Christ, the Son of God.

You've been given eyes to see the Lord Jesus and the salvation for you so that you know that he's the one who came to bring recovery of sight for the blind, to bring freedom for the captive, the captive, captives such as ourselves.

Once we're captive to sin but now freed because of the freeing deliverance of the Lord Jesus. And it may well be that some of you are a wee bit afraid to go to the table tomorrow because you know your sins, you know your indwelling sins, you know, as I know how unworthy I am to be at the table and to eat and to drink from the elements.

But the question isn't about your unworthiness, my unworthiness. None of us are worthy. But are you recognizing Christ's worthiness?

Can you echo the words of the saints in glory who exclaim worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing?

[22 : 37] Well if you're echoing these words your place is at the table tomorrow. You know that he's worthy because of his death for you and so you take your place at the table to remember the Lord's death till he comes.

But if there's that true recognizing of Jesus then what else do we notice here? There's the Savior's recognizing faithful service. There's Jesus recognizing Mary and her faithfulness to Jesus and as we saw there in verse 10 Jesus says she's done she's done a beautiful thing to me she's done a good work to me she's done a noble thing for me why?

Why was it a good work? Well you go into verse 12 when pouring this ointment on my body she's done it to prepare me for burial in the Middle East in the Middle East of course in Jesus' time bodies were prepared for burial after they died spices, perfumes wrapped around the dead body but Mary's doing this preparation while Jesus is still alive because the focus is on the body of Christ the body that will be offered for the sin of the world the body of Christ giving us that holocaust that whole burnt offering given holy for the sins of his people and Mary's recognizing in that body the body that's to be anointed the body that she anoints she's recognizing that body that that body is to be given for the sake of the world Jesus knows that he's about to die and be buried because remember as prophet as prophet he'd come to proclaim the message of salvation through his bodily death because he'd come as priest to offer up his body as that sacrifice for sin because he'd come as king come as king to bring in his kingdom to reign in the hearts of his people so Mary and her anointing the body of Jesus has revealed something beautiful she's revealed the majesty of Jesus she's revealed the reign of Christ that rule that reign that Christ this bodily death will accomplish and will accomplish as accomplished for the sake of his people as you prepare as you prepare in your heart to remember the death of the Lord

Jesus think of that beautiful act that Mary performed for her saviour you know think on her action a quiet silent honouring of her saviour you know in that act of anointing yes preparing Jesus for his burial that burial of course that presumed his death so it's for you and I tomorrow I love the time of communion in that silence as the meal is taken in silence the word is spoken simply that passing of the bread one to another the cup one to another done in the the dignity of silence Mary of Bethany in that silent action that she performed in the anointing of Jesus may that be an encouragement to you in the silent act that we perform tomorrow that we remember yes the death of the Lord Jesus remember the one who died and was buried and raised again on the third day and Mary in her action pointing to the Lord

Jesus in his suffering for us and his dying for us and his being dead for us the action of Mary spoke of a beautiful thing somebody said wrote this this beautiful thing despite its grim message well tomorrow you are going to be doing a beautiful thing and remember the Lord's death yes you might say okay the death of Jesus is a grim message because of the sinless son of God taking the sin of his people upon him the son becoming sin grim message the sinless son of God being made sin for us facing the curse of God the wrath of God for sin but you know by faith that the grim message is a glorious message you know you know that by his wounds you're healed so that beautiful action of Mary that beautiful action that

[27 : 18] Mary performed towards Jesus there yes pointing to the beautiful act of the Lord Jesus on the cross and his bearing sin for us yes a grim message but at the same time a beautiful message by his wounds you're healed well Jesus commended Mary for her actions and more because you see in verse 13 there's this great commendation truly I say to you whenever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world what she has done will also be told in memory of her Jesus speaking here of this worldwide proclamation of the gospel even if we take Mary out of it for a moment Jesus is saying the gospel will be proclaimed throughout the world this good news of salvation is going to be proclaimed after his death it will be continually proclaimed until Jesus returns in judgment because that gospel proclamation is about Jesus it's about the saviour but notice here and it is amazingly

Jesus is saying that accompanying that message that message that's centred on him will be the memory of a woman who did something wonderful something beautiful for Jesus just at that particular moment as Jesus neared Calvary he neared then that garden tomb Mary did something beautiful for Jesus and that action is not going to be forgotten it's in the pages of scripture it's recorded in the three gospels Matthew Mark John divinely inspired to record this testimony testimony of this beautiful woman it is a beautiful thing for the Lord so these words that Matthew give us here these are a memorial these are a lasting memorial six days ago when I was in Wittenberg I couldn't get away from memorial after memorial to Martin Luther but this memorial to Mary is of such deep significance this memorial to Mary speaks louder than any physical memorial to heroes of the past as we prepare to go to the table tomorrow yes as we go there with our preparation with us having been prepared through the actions of

Mary or Bethany I pray that we help them more clearly to see the sacrifice that Jesus paid for our salvation this anointing that Mary performed at Bethany happening in a small house in a small town in Judea that action that single action is worldwide important important for each and every Christian that quiet retiring woman as we said that woman who went silently at Jesus' feet listening to Jesus teach while her more active Martha went here there and everywhere in the house will this woman Mary's noble action point us to the Saviour point us to Jesus Jesus whose love for sinners was such that he was willing to be anointed for his burial that could speak of his life being given up for the sake of sinners that willingness of Jesus should motivate you and motivate you to want to be at the table tomorrow to want to profess our faith in Lord

Jesus our love for the Lord Jesus our gratitude to him we want to profess once more in this public act of remembrance we want to profess our faith in him our love for him our hope in him we'll pray that this time of preparation will have been a blessing a blessing to you the trust that's been to myself as we as a congregation gather once more at the Lord's table in obedience to Christ's word to remember his death till he comes coming let us pray Lord our God our Heavenly Father you have so given us to consider this passage of scripture we pray Lord that as we see again and read again of the beautiful act of Mary towards Jesus we will see and know the beautiful act of the

Lord Jesus in his giving of his life for us on the cross Lord help us to live lives that are cross centred Christ glorified God honoring spirit filled help us Lord to do your will to take delight in doing your will even in obedience to your word even in obedience to that command to take and to eat as you have so given us to do in remembrance of the Lord's death till he comes so bless Lord we pray this hour of worship and forgive us our sins even in it we ask in Jesus name Amen Himself to He was good to fitted to him to him to him to old Samuel down