

“FOLLOWING THE KING – 80”
Matthew 26:1-13

We're back in Matthew's Gospel again this morning, continuing our journey through his account of the life and teaching of Jesus, who has come into our world as the Kingly Messiah, the herald of God's Kingdom. Predicted by the Hebrew prophets and preachers, Jesus came to teach about the Kingdom of God – God's renewed and restored creation under his sovereign rule – and to offer glimpses of it in his own life. Matthew has been eager to demonstrate in this account, written for the first Jewish followers of Jesus, that Jesus is, indeed, the culmination of all those Old Testament prophecies and that his Jewish believers are not betraying their faith and heritage, but rather discovering what it has all been leading up to. At the point where we pick up the story this morning, Jesus is in Jerusalem, just a couple of days away from his execution. We know that, but the people he is with obviously don't. However, the storm clouds are gathering. The first part of our reading this morning describes the intrigue going on amongst the ruling elite, who see Jesus as a threat to their power base and want to get rid of him – but discreetly.

It's almost Passover time: just two days away. And people are flocking to Jerusalem. The festival itself will be a joyful affair, a real celebration – and there are preliminary parties going on already. Groups of friends and family are getting together for a meal and a chat before the main festivities begin. Jesus and his friends are staying just outside the city in the village of Bethany. And tonight they are in the home of Simon. It's a particularly happy occasion because Simon used to be a leper and was, until recently, excluded from such occasions. But he's been healed by Jesus and is now holding his first Passover party, with Jesus there as well.

As Jesus reclines at the table, he's well aware that there are people out to get him. The chief priests and teachers of the law have been looking for an opportunity to kill him ever since he came into Jerusalem last Sunday. Since then, he has run riot in the Temple courtyard, made some very pointed comments about corruption in the Temple hierarchy, hinted that he might be the Messiah, criticised the religious rituals of the Jewish leaders and cursed a perfectly good fig tree. As we've said, they are desperate to get rid of him, but know that any open attempt to do so runs the risk of upsetting the people who cheered him into the city a few days ago. But tonight's a night to relax away from the crowds, away from the places where he might easily be caught or killed. After all, it's not quite time yet.

And as the food is passed around and the wine flows freely, Jesus joins in the conversation and enjoys the occasion with his old friends and new acquaintances. But then there is a bit of a disturbance as a woman comes into the room. Some of those present know her, some know of her and many have no idea at all who she is. There's an awkward silence – no-one is quite sure what to do. Why is she here? Is she part

of the plot against Jesus? Is she some lone lunatic, a stalker or some kind of obsessive? Maybe she has a message for Jesus?

But she makes straight for Jesus and from under the folds of her cloak she pulls a small bottle. It's a posh bottle, made of alabaster, with a long, sealed neck. You can tell from the bottle that the contents must be pretty special, too, and as she breaks off the top of the bottle and the fragrance starts to fill the room, it's obvious that this is nard (identified by Mark in his version of this story) – a perfume made from the root of a plant found only in India, a perfume that is so expensive only the richest people can afford it. And the woman tips the bottle over Jesus' head so that it drips down through his hair and beard. As he sits there, slightly baffled at first, a year's wages worth of perfume runs down his body and clothes.

The other guests look on with a mixture of astonishment and horror. It's Passover time, a time when alms are given to the poor, when people try to compensate for their own expensive celebrations by giving to charity. Just think how many people could have been helped by the small fortune that has been wasted in this prodigal act. What on earth will Jesus say? How is he going to react?

As the other guests – and particularly Jesus' disciples – rebuke and criticise her, expecting Jesus to join in, he looks up and smiles at her. Then turns to the others and tells them to give her a break. He speaks words of affirmation and appreciation. What she has done is not a waste, but something beautiful. It's a mark of her devotion to him, a sign of her love and her worship. The act of anointing him even carries with it more hints that he might be the Messiah – after all, Messiah (like Christ) means “anointed”. He approves and this act will go down in history. Judas doesn't approve. As we'll see next time, he slips off to make his fateful deal with the leaders, and his act too will go down in history.

Once again, we are able to see the contrasts that are so starkly drawn here. Here is a woman who has openly come to demonstrate her love for Jesus in a way that cannot be denied. And as she is doing it the leaders of the people are plotting secretly to express their hatred for him. She comes to enhance life: they want to end his life. As she pours out the ointment in an act of generosity that will be spoken of for centuries to come, the other guests – and the disciples in particular – focus on the mercenary: how much has this cost? What could have been done with the money? Where's my cut coming from?

And, of course, the attitudes and actions of the other guests are very much what we'd approve of, aren't they? There's a pragmatism that chimes in well with our approach to church life. But it's that pragmatic approach which is rejected by the woman and, by implication, by Jesus himself. Matthew contrasts that with the extravagance of the woman, the almost wasteful demonstration of her love for and devotion to

Jesus. If the perfume used had been marketed by L’Oreal, this would have been the only occasion when the subject could have looked at the camera and truly said, “*Because I’m worth it.*”

Jesus is worth it. This extravagance is only what he deserves. There can be no limits to the ways in which we express our devotion. And yet church is one of the places where the expression of our devotion is often most limited. Pragmatism is the order of the day in worship and in so many other areas of church life. Our attitude as Christians is so often quite at odds with the attitude which Jesus here calls “*beautiful*”.

What we really want is Christianity on the cheap. We don’t want our worship, our devotion, our expressions of commitment to Jesus to be showy or ostentatious: that would be a “*waste*” of resources or it would be verging on the attitude that we look suspiciously at in other parts of the church, or at other times in church history, and piously dismiss as idolatry. Our church architecture is functional, our church furnishings are pragmatic, our church programmes are tailored to people’s needs rather than to giving glory to the one who is worth it. So much of what you find in many churches is cheap, second-hand, corner-cutting. What happens when Christians feel they need new furniture at home? They go and get the best and offer the old stuff to the church. Church halls up and down the land become resting places for old armchairs and bits of carpet. That’s not the case most of the time, here, fortunately, but why do we want the best for our homes, but not for the house of God? What is it saying about our attitude to Jesus Christ?

And that attitude spills over into our attendance at worship, too. You may have come here this morning to meet with your friends – fair enough. But I like to think that we might have come here to meet with God. How prepared are we for that? Did we make any effort to get here on time? Are we dressed any better to meet with God than to go to the pub or to go to work? How are we going to behave in the presence of the one who is truly worth it? Now there are all kinds of issues there to do with culture and so on, but just ask yourself whether you really do feel that you can be extravagant in your worship. Do you love Jesus so much that you are prepared to worship him with no regard for how much it costs, how long it goes on (James wrote some thought-provoking stuff about that in this month’s *Vision*) and how much it may appear wasteful?

What does the way we express our commitment to Jesus say about how much we value him? Particularly when it is compared with the ways in which we express our commitment to our workplace or our home. I wonder if Jesus would call our actions “*beautiful*” or whether he would see what we do as penny-pinching, mean-spirited and over careful. Jesus gave everything he had for you and me. He gave up glory in heaven that we cannot even begin to imagine. He willingly laid aside power and majesty at

God's right hand in order to come into this world as a frail, vulnerable, limited human being: to be humiliated, criticised, beaten, executed in order that we might have the opportunity to participate in the life of the Kingdom of God. How do we demonstrate our gratitude for that? By offering him our cast-offs and our fag-ends, stuff we've finished with and the loose change from the bottom of our pockets. By trying to pray to him when we're so tired we cannot concentrate, and mechanically singing songs while our minds wander elsewhere. As God says to his people in *Malachi*, when they're doing very little in response to all he's done for them, "How would your boss respond if your attitude to work was like your attitude to me?" (It's in *Malachi 1:6-8*, if you want to check.)

It's shocking, isn't it? This story brings us up with a jolt when we begin to realise just how mean we are with our expressions of worship. But what I found really shocking as I read through this for the umpteenth time earlier this week is what Jesus says in *v13*. This is actually part of the gospel, part of the good news of God's new kingdom. What this woman did was to be told as part of the preaching of the gospel throughout the world. Extravagant worship is amongst the values of the kingdom. What's that all about, then?

Well, there are always going to be opportunities to reach out to the poor and the needy. That's also a cornerstone of the Kingdom. We cannot escape our obligations to those who are dispossessed, disadvantaged, desperate. But there's more to it than loyalty to our fellow human beings. We have a loyalty to Jesus that we need to find some way of expressing. Good works, helping the poor, all that kind of thing – that's stuff that anyone can do. Those who follow other religions and no religion at all can do that. But as followers of Jesus we are called to do that and go beyond it. One writer (Hugh Anderson) puts it like this: "*Jesus teaches that good works such as almsgiving (v9) are not so much ruled out (v11) as transcended by the new and higher loyalties unfolded in and with his ministry and message.*"

Those who follow Jesus need to have a way of showing that their love for their fellow man and women springs from a love for their Saviour and Lord. Many of the Afro-Caribbean members of the congregation at the church where we worshipped in London really dolled themselves up to go to church, because they were going to worship their God. Here, for example, not only do we offer help to those who need it in a new set of buildings – but we ensure that the quality and furnishing and decoration of those buildings say something about how much we love Jesus.

Don't hold back in your expressions of worship and devotion. Fling your hands in the air. Dance in the aisles. Put your best frock on or a nice bright tie. Let's fill this place with the very best for Jesus. We're worshipping the love of our life – our eternal life! It's a form of witness. It's part of preaching the gospel. It might not be pragmatic all the time. It might seem a prodigal waste of resources. It might

simply appear extravagant – but to Jesus, if it really is an expression of our devotion to him, it is something beautiful, “*Because he’s worth it!*”

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In preparation for the Passover, Jesus and his friends are staying just outside the city in the village of Bethany. And tonight they are in the home of Simon, who used to be a leper and was, until recently, excluded from such occasions. But he’s been healed by Jesus and is now holding his first Passover party, with Jesus there as well.

As Jesus reclines at the table, he’s well aware that there are people out to get him. The chief priests and teachers of the law have been looking for an opportunity to kill him ever since he came into Jerusalem last Sunday (vv1-5). Then there is a bit of a disturbance as a woman comes into the room. Some of those present know her, some know of her and many have no idea at all who she is. But she makes straight for Jesus and from under the folds of her cloak she pulls a small bottle. It’s a posh bottle, made of alabaster, with a long, sealed neck. You can tell from the bottle that the contents must be pretty special, too, and as she breaks off the top of the bottle and the fragrance starts to fill the room, it’s obvious that this is a perfume that is so expensive only the richest people can afford it. And the woman tips the bottle over Jesus’ head so that it drips down through his hair and beard. It’s Passover time, a time when alms are given to the poor, when people try to compensate for their own expensive celebrations by giving to charity. Just think how many people could have been helped by the small fortune that has been wasted in this prodigal act. What on earth will Jesus say? How is he going to react?

As the other guests – and particularly Jesus’ disciples – rebuke and criticise her, expecting Jesus to join in, he looks up and smiles at her. Then turns to the others and tells them to give her a break. He speaks words of affirmation and appreciation. What she has done is not a waste, but something beautiful. It’s a mark of her devotion to him, a sign of her love and her worship.

Jesus is worth it. This extravagance is only what he deserves. There can be no limits to the ways in which we express our devotion. But, like the disciples, we don’t want our worship, our devotion, our expressions of commitment to Jesus to be showy or ostentatious. What is it saying about our attitude to Jesus Christ?

What does the way we express our commitment to Jesus say about how much we value him? Particularly when it is compared with the ways in which we express our commitment to our workplace or our home. Jesus gave everything he had for you and me. He gave up glory in heaven that we cannot even begin to imagine. He willingly laid aside power and majesty at God’s right hand in order to come into this world as a frail, vulnerable, limited human being: to be humiliated, criticised, beaten, executed in order that we might have the opportunity to participate in the life of the Kingdom of God. How do we demonstrate our gratitude for that? (Look at *Malachi 1:6-8*.)

Don’t hold back in your expressions of worship and devotion. Fling your hands in the air. Dance in the aisles. Put your best frock on or a nice bright tie. Let’s fill this place with the very best for Jesus. We’re worshipping the love of our life – our eternal life! It’s a form of witness. It’s part of preaching the gospel. It might not be pragmatic all the time. It might seem a prodigal waste of resources. It might simply appear extravagant – but to Jesus, if it really is an expression of our devotion to him, it is something beautiful, “*Because he’s worth it!*”

Questions for discussion

1. Why might the people have rioted during the Passover?
2. Try to imagine that you are a guest at the meal. How would you have responded to the woman’s gesture towards Jesus?
3. What does Jesus mean by his words in v11?

4. Give some examples of how we cut corners and worship "on the cheap". Why do you think we have such a poor attitude to worship?
5. How might we demonstrate "extravagant worship" in our churches? In our lives? When does such worship actually become wasteful or idolatrous?