

## Messianic anointing (Mark 14: 1-11)

### **The Plot to Kill Jesus**

*14* It was two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him; <sup>2</sup>for they said, 'Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people.'

### **The Anointing at Bethany**

*3* While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. <sup>4</sup>But some were there who said to one another in anger, 'Why was the ointment wasted in this way?' <sup>5</sup>For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.' And they scolded her. <sup>6</sup>But Jesus said, 'Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me.' <sup>7</sup>For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. <sup>8</sup>She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. <sup>9</sup>Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.'

### **Judas Agrees to Betray Jesus**

*10* Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. <sup>11</sup>When they heard it, they were greatly pleased, and promised to give him money. So he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.  
(Translation © Lawrence Moore, *Mark for Missional Disciples*, Walking the Walk Publications, 2018)

## Commentary

### **The plot to kill Jesus**

It is now Tuesday – two days before Passover. The confrontation between Jesus and the temple authorities that began with the exorcism of the temple (11:15-16) has been played out and has reached its deadly conclusion: Jesus has prophesied the complete destruction of the temple, and the chief priests and scribes are looking for a way to arrest and kill Jesus without causing a popular riot.

We have watched this climax building ever since the incident in the Capernaum synagogue when Jesus healed a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath (3:1-6). That resulted in the Pharisees and Herodians conspired together to destroy Jesus.

It is interesting that Mark uses the verb “to destroy” in 3:6, rather than “kill”. On the one hand, it may be insignificant; on the other, it illuminates their strategy of trying to neutralize the threat that Jesus poses because of his power and its electrifying effect on the people (cf 1:27-28). His popularity makes it very difficult to move against Jesus. Their first response, therefore, is to try and “destroy” him – to discredit him. This makes sense of the accusation that he is possessed by Be’elzebul (3:20-22). Time and again, they challenge Jesus as a law-breaker, but are bested by Jesus in the exchanges.

Here in Jerusalem, Jesus has taken the fight to them. His first act on arrival in the Holy City has been to exorcise the temple (11:15-17). The response of the chief priests and scribes is entirely believable, and underscores the dilemma that they have faced during Jesus’ entire ministry: they are afraid of him; they want to kill him; but Jesus holds “the crowd” spellbound (11:18). We have just watched the series of last-ditch attempts in the temple to discredit Jesus publicly backfire spectacularly. At the conclusion of the final confrontation, the battle lines are drawn: Jesus has abandoned the temple, and the temple authorities have abandoned their attempt to win the crowd over. They will now focus all their efforts on finding a way to arrest Jesus when his supporters are not around, and kill him.

### **The answer to Jesus’ challenge (11:30)**

We need also to note that the plot to kill Jesus exposes finally the resistance of the temple authorities to God’s saving actions. At the outset of the temple exchanges, Jesus was asked, “Where does your authority for doing these things come from?” (11:28). Jesus refused to answer unless they first answered his own challenge: “Was John’s baptism of human or divine origin?” (11:30).

Mark’s narrative point has been absolutely clear: Jesus is clearly God’s messiah. Everything that he has said and done shouts of its divine origin – however unexpectedly the form that his messiahship takes. In fact, Jesus is none other than God’s Beloved Son.

Jesus, as messiah and Son of God, becomes the focal point for human resistance to God and God's purposes for human flourishing. The whole history of resistance to God's Kingdom is played out in the crucifixion of Jesus: the powers that make the world the way it is include the religious powers of Jesus' day. The temple, which ought to be the place that proclaims God's grace and salvation most eloquently, becomes the centre of resistance to Jesus and his message of the Kingdom. The divine voice had spoken at the Transfiguration: "This is my Beloved Son! Listen to him!" (9:7). The response of the temple authorities is to kill Jesus.

The "double response" to the Kingdom is clearly visible: for the poorest and most marginalized, the no-strings promise and offer of the Kingdom comes as Good News. For the powerful, whose privilege and advantage is vested in the way things are, the Kingdom sounds as a threat to be eliminated at all costs.

### **Preparing for Good Friday**

Have you noticed the change of pace in Mark's narrative? He has brought us at incredible pace to the outskirts of Jerusalem. The pace alone tells us how determinedly he has headed to this point. Interestingly, it is only once we are "at the city gates" that Mark slows the narrative pace, concentrating on the passage of time. There is a sense in which the entire gospel has been on "fast forward" as he whips through the lead-up that brings us to the events of Holy Week. Now he lets go of the button, and the story is allowed to proceed slowly enough for the readers to take in every moment of the unfolding drama.

Mark frames this section of his narrative as a time of preparation for what lies ahead. While Jerusalem – and the whole Jewish world – is engaged in preparations for Passover, Mark shows us the preparations that are being made for Good Friday. In the temple, plans are being hatched to arrest and kill Jesus. Meanwhile, back in Bethany ...

### **Messianic anointing at Bethany (14: 3-9)**

This is a strange passage in several ways – not least because of what it *includes* (Simon’s name, that he was a leper, the monetary value of the ointment) and what it *leaves out* (the silence on the woman’s name is positively deafening). This is extraordinarily ironic: the woman who will be remembered wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world and in all time is anonymous! Wouldn’t it be good to know who she was? And is it surprising that it is a *woman* who is so strikingly “forgotten” even as she is remembered? This is the significance of Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s book, *In Memory of Her*.

What is it about what she does that is so “memorable”? Jesus is doing more than saying, “This is a very striking incident that ought not to be forgotten”. He is holding the woman up as a paradigm of discipleship. Remember that the second half of Mark’s gospel is about the Way of the Cross and the deep resistance of the disciples to it. The point here is that the woman – unlike the disciples and Peter in particular – *accepts* that Jesus is facing the cross. She does not try to dissuade him from the path, but *prepares* him for it. In effect, she says, “I am doing what I can to walk this road with you”. It is costly ointment because the road ahead for Jesus is costly.

For the Twelve – Jesus’ male disciples – Easter is remembered as the story of their betrayal and abandonment of Jesus. It is women disciples who keep faith throughout Easter: this unknown woman who anoints Jesus in preparation for his Passion, and the two Marys and Salome (rather than Peter, James and John) who arrive at the tomb on Easter Sunday to anoint his body for burial.

### **Judas volunteers to sell Jesus out**

The authorities have been conspiring to kill Jesus ever since 3:6. As the Passover approaches, Mark resumes the conspiracy narrative. Judas’ actions and the elaborate preparations for the Passover (14: 12-15) are puzzling at first sight. Why do the authorities need a traitor? Why not simply seize Jesus? And why the emphasis on the Passover preparations that have led many commentators to see

this as some sort of miraculous foreknowledge that Jesus has about what the “two disciples” will find in the city?

These begin to make perfect sense when we recognise that Jesus and the disciples have gone underground. Jesus is planning his “Jerusalem campaign” strategically. Bethany is a safe haven for the group, which is being hunted by the authorities. Jesus has been careful to date: his appearances in the city have been deliberately public, in the Temple, where it would have been difficult to seize him without provoking a riot. Mark paints a picture of a volatile situation that both makes it difficult for the authorities to move openly against Jesus and makes it necessary for Jesus to be very circumspect.

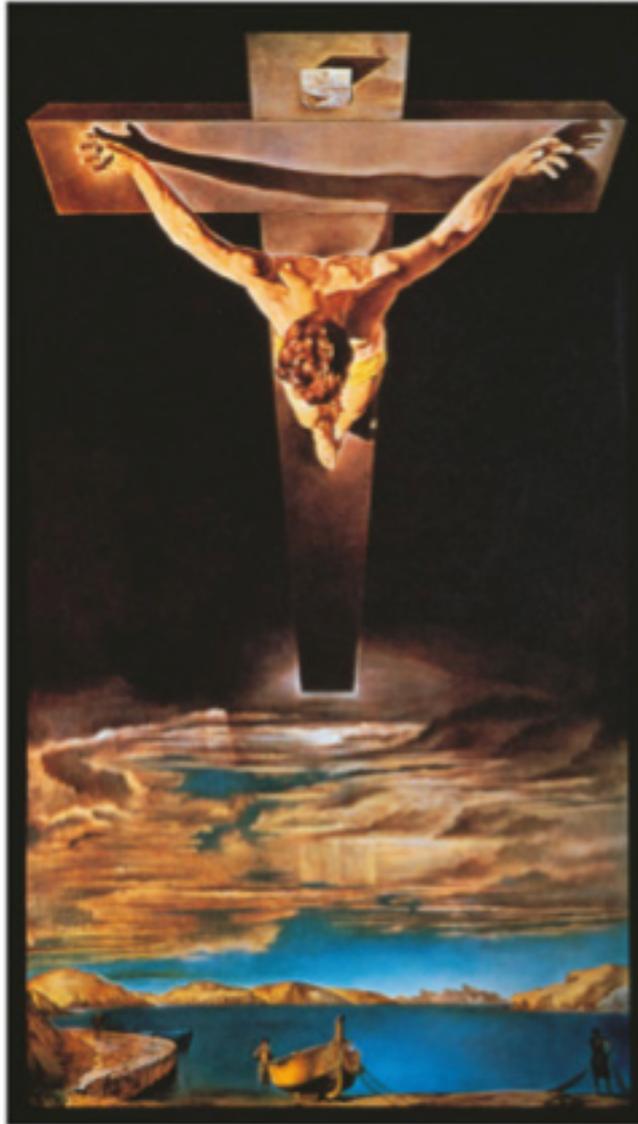
They are in Bethany in secret. If the authorities are to take him at a time of their choosing (preferably at night), they will need to know the group’s movements. They need someone on the inside who is prepared to keep them informed – and that person is Judas. Judas *initiates* the betrayal: he goes to the chief priests and agrees to betray Jesus for the promise of money.

There have been all sorts of bourgeois attempts to exonerate Judas. Most commonly, he is portrayed as someone who is misguided, rather than traitorous: if he can engineer a confrontation with the Sanhedrin – bring matters to a head – then Jesus will have to act. The uprising for which Judas (traditionally a Zealot) hopes will be triggered. Devastatingly for Judas, he realizes too late that he has been the agent of Jesus’ destruction, rather than his helper. This and variations on a similar theme have been the subject of scholarly and popular treatments of Judas books and films (eg *Jesus Christ Superstar*).

Mark’s narrative has no truck with these readings. His story reflects a situation only too well known among underground resistance communities: someone can almost always be found to sell out their friends and companions for money or safety. The Judas narrative had tragically close echoes for Mark’s community as a community under pressure during the Great Revolt.

Mark doesn't invoke any theory of satanic inspiration for Judas' actions: it is straightforward, grubby money-grabbing. And so Judas begins to look for an opportunity to deliver Jesus to the authorities at time when he can be taken without fear of a riot. That means that he needs to find a time when they are in the city (rather than at Bethany) or close enough for the authorities to get together an arresting party at short notice. And it needs to be at a time that will enable them to act without being observed by the people – ideally, therefore, at night. It will be the Passover that provides the opportunity.

### **Going deeper into the text (Mark 14: 1-11)**



Being Scottish born and as a kid living in Glasgow it was compulsory at least once a year to visit Kelvin Grove Museum, I remember running around its labyrinth like corridors and galleries, Gawking at stuffed elephants and rows upon rows of prehistoric bones. No trip to Kelvin Grove was complete however without walking up the large marble stairs to the upper art galleries and as any Scottish person of my age will tell you seeing from a long way off Salvador Dalí's crucified Christ. It was for many of us our first and sometimes last encounter with images of Jesus. Pictures of Jesus not being a strong tradition in the Scottish kirk.

the vertigo inducing dali version of Jesus as had no lasting theological effect on me other to leave me with the knowledge than any image can often say so much more than words. Maybe that's why when I read the story of the anointing at Bethany the image that lurches into my mind's eye is one of Jesus sitting with his disciples alone ,head bowed in his hands. The picture in my head is one of a sad and despairing Jesus. Bewildered and dismayed at the stupidity of his disciples.

The context of the Mark story is that Jesus and his disciples are very much up against it. It's clear from the first two verses that the powers that be are out to get them and its clear from the last two verses that Judas is going to help them. This is story at a time when this group of Galileans had their backs against the wall and they realised that their stand against the elite was beginning to look like the last stand at the Alamo.



Here at Simon's house in Bethany Jesus sits embattled, desperately in need of comfort as all the worries of the world and the situation rest on his shoulders. To this shattered Jesus a disciple demonstrates her care and love by bathing him, it's an act of solidarity and support for a

man surrounded by enemies and worries.

But it's what the disciples do next that propels Jesus head to his hands, it's the very moment when the powers are circling the Galilean wagons that the disciples choose to fallout and fight. The very moment when they need to focus on the real issue is the moment they construct a reason to argue. We are told by mark that they swelled up in anger, indignant at the waste of perfume. Well if ever they was a clear example of transference then here it is. If the disciples had been on the Titanic after it had hit the iceberg they would now be engaged in a full scale heated discussion on where to put the deck chairs.

No wonder Jesus was shaking his head ,they end up fighting themselves and as he covers his eyes in disbelief at their inability to engage with the real issue and they eagerness to pick on the easy and unimportant. In my multi medium mind's eye Jesus gentle sings as he despairs.

**Clowns to the left of me,  
Jokers to the right, here I am,  
Stuck in the middle with you  
Yes I'm stuck in the middle with you,  
And I'm wondering what it is I should do**

I wonder if we are not a bit like the disciples, our response to hard uncertain times leads us inwards to pick fights, to argue with each other . To pick theological fights that may be theologically sound, theologically interesting but are ultimately theologically blind alleys. Our principled arguments are sometimes unprincipled transference. Driven not by our beliefs but by our fears. Do we not need to resist the urge to clothe our indignation in righteousness. Or like the first disciples the image that we may hold in our heads

is one of Jesus despairing of our behaviour.

**Question.** Can you think of a time in our church we had a good argument for a bad reason?

**Question.** What makes you well up in anger at church?

**Question.** Do you enjoy disagreeing maybe too much? Can you think of someone who does?

## All age worship ideas (Mark 14: 1-11)

One of the keys to good all age worship is to keep it simple and relatively short. Ideally aim for a service of 45-50 minutes. That's not to say a service can't be longer but if you are thinking of 1hr30+ think carefully about your use of space and above all else be creative, take risks and have fun – partying is integral to the kingdom but we'll leave that for a year on Luke...

**Reflection** – This is one of those passages where Jesus must have had his head in his hands. Although Mark is less specific than Matthew it would seem that the complaints against the woman who anoints him come from his own friends. There they are in the home of the unfortunately named Simon the Leper receiving hospitality when a woman comes and blesses Jesus with expensive nard. We are not told the woman's motives except that Jesus himself interprets the anointing he receives from her as preparation for his burial. The implication is that against the ignorance of those who have travelled with Jesus daily here is a woman who 'gets it'! She understands what is to come and she seeks to do something beautiful and honouring for a man who represents the hope for Israel and perhaps most significantly for the woman herself – he is hope for her own life.

Although John identifies the woman as Mary, sister of Martha, Mark and Matthew give her no identity – yet Jesus correctly asserts that this simple, and expensive,

action will secure her place in history.

Jesus' retort about the poor harks back to the teaching in the law from Deuteronomy where instructions are given in relation to loans and Jubilee. The expectation of God is that through the correct and fair sharing of wealth no one has any need to be poor. However, even in the law there comes the realistic admission of the likelihood there will always be poor because people are unable to live up to the expectation. In which case it is incumbent on the faithful to ensure that the poor are adequately provided for in every way.

In the home of Simon the Leper Jesus receives anointing in anticipation of his giving up everything on a Roman cross. The ointment may appear costly but it pales into insignificance in light of what Jesus is to offer, and in light of the cost of discipleship. Jesus' remark is a rebuke similar to the speck in the eye versus log – if the woman's critics are so concerned for the poor then they need to examine their own motives and actions.

**Ideas** – Play a touch and smell game – have 4 or 5 covered bottles and see if people can identify the smell. Likewise have 4 or 5 boxes or bags with items that people must identify by touch.

Think on the way in which smells and things we touch stir memories. Today we might see the woman's actions as completely inappropriate but Jesus welcomed that multi-sensory experience as a worship offering - something beautiful, extravagant and memorable. This shouldn't be the exception to the rule – our worship should always be those things – beautiful, extravagant and memorable in honour of the one who made the costliest sacrifice.

**Prayers** – have a range of scented candles and incense burners and begin by reading Psalm 141.1-2 then invite people to offer their prayers as they light one of the candles or burners.

The lighting is a symbol of our recognition that God hears our prayers and cares about our concerns. He loves us.

The incense is an honouring of his presence and thanksgiving for his extravagant and costly offering to us in and through Jesus.

You may wish to sing or have playing 'O Lord hear my prayer' as people come forward.

A song to close might be 'A Touching place (Christ's is the world)' from Wildgoose worship

## **Liturgies and hymns (Mark 14: 1-11)**

This is where you can find hymn suggestions and liturgies for use with this week's text.

### **Prayer Reflection**

Mary moved to the table,  
holding the precious ointment,  
her eyes meeting and holding  
the gaze of the One preparing to die.

Mary fell to her knees  
and broke open her treasure,  
massaging the fragrant oil into his feet,  
and wiping them with her hair.

Mary kept her eyes on his,  
as a collective sigh arose,  
followed by a bitter criticism,

an attempt to disqualify her action.

Mary's tense shoulders relaxed  
at his words "Leave her alone":  
Defended by Jesus  
she could take on the whole world.

Jesus, friend and defender,  
may we who remember her story,  
be emboldened to live  
with sensuality, courage and passion. Amen.

~ written by Ann Siddall, and posted on the website of the Stillpoint Spirituality  
Centre. <http://www.stillpointsa.org.au/>

### **Prayer of Commitment: Costly Grace**

#### **Prayer**

(inspired by Matthew 26:6-13, Mark 14:3-9, Luke 7:36-50, John 12:1-8)

Loving God, how lavishly you pour out  
the costly gift of your grace upon us.  
Fill our homes and our lives  
with the fragrance of your love,  
so that we may show your glory  
and serve your people;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

~ posted on the website of the Office of Theology, **Presbyterian Church USA.**  
<http://www.pcusa.org/>

### **Gospel Reflection: The Anointing**

Here's a prayer reflection on John 12:1-8 (or Matthew 26:6-13, Mark 14:3-9, Luke 7:36-50), where Mary anoints Jesus' feet with perfume. It was written by Thom Shuman.

**because**

because  
we have preserved our joy  
in manna jars  
for the long winter of despair,  
storing them in the dark corners  
of our souls,  
we have forgotten  
its gritty taste;

because  
we have put a tight lid  
on our joy,  
and put it in the back  
of the pantry,  
we have forgotten  
how it can tickle  
our noses;

because  
we are so busy  
prattling pious platitudes  
about the poor, the least, the lost,  
we ignore your words  
which anoint them  
as your children;

because  
we have put up  
the shutters and storm doors  
to keep your future  
from sneaking in,  
we have missed  
the sweet breeze  
carrying your hope  
to us;

because  
we are who we are,  
restore us, Holy Grace,  
and make us  
a fragrant offering  
to the world.

~ Copyright © Thom M. Shuman. Posted  
on **Prayers4Today**. <http://prayersfortoday.blogspot.ca/>

### **Call to Confession**

Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to the home of Lazarus and received hospitality like no one had seen before – generous, loving, whole-hearted, and even a little bit undignified. His disciple Judas could only see the inefficiency of the gift, not the spirit of loving-kindness with which it was offered. We, like Judas, often want to expedite our giving without really engaging with those we are called to serve. Let us consider the depth of our relationships with those we encounter and with the One who calls us to faith, as we confess our sin in silence.

*[pause for silence]*

### **Prayer of Confession (*unison*)**

**We confess, Anointed One, that we excuse ourselves  
from reaching out to those who need your care.**

**We take your words – that there will always be unmet needs –  
as a reason not to try to meet the needs we can.**

**Forgive us, and help us to change.**

**Renew our determination to live**

**as faithful followers, faithful disciples, faithful Christians.**

**Help us to work with you for the well-being of your creation,**

**that the fortunes of all your peoples may be restored.     Amen.**

### **Assurance of God's Love**

We, too, are a part of the Way-Maker's will for restoration.

We are called, through Christ Jesus, to strive for restoration,  
but we are not called to do this work alone.

The One who has made a way in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert,  
will surely equip us for all we are asked to do in Christ's name.

God will empower us to attain all the potential God has placed within us.

Thanks be to God!

~ posted on the United Church of Christ's **Worship Ways**

**Archive.**<http://www.ucc.org/>

### **Hymn suggestion**

#### **86. SHE DID WHAT SHE COULD**

*Mark 14:3-9     tune: The Ash Grove     Revd Dr John Campbell*

1. She came with a token

- yet nothing was spoken -

her ointment jar broken  
to do what she would.  
Sweet perfume of caring  
on Jesus' head sharing,  
for his death preparing,  
she did what she could.

**Praise God for her vision,  
despite the derision,  
her mighty decision  
to do what she could.  
may her act inspire us,  
her confidence fire us,  
when others require us  
to change things for good!**

2. The others at table  
were none of them able  
to see her as stable,  
but both mad and rude.  
Quite blind to the woman,  
not seeing her human  
they laughed at this no-one  
who "did what she could".

3. Yet Jesus found power  
to face his dark hour  
in love she let flower,  
so he understood  
the worth beyond measure  
of this simple treasure  
that gives God true pleasure -

she did what she could!

**Praise God for her vision,  
despite the derision,  
her mighty decision  
to do what she could.  
may her act inspire us,  
her confidence fire us,  
when others require us  
to change things for good!**