



Jamaica Methodist District

Holy Week 2020 Meditation Series

MEDITATION FOR THE WEDNESDAY OF HOLY WEEK 2020

ANOINTING DEVALUED

(MARK 14: 1 – 11)

The focus for this fourth day of Holy Week is the anointing of Jesus' body with very expensive ointment. The record in Mark's gospel, chapter 14, verse 3 states: "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". The topic I am giving to this meditation is "Anointing Devalued".

The account of the anointing is carried in John's Gospel, chapter 12, verses 1 - 8, as well as in Luke chapter 7, verses 36 - 50. Somehow, I like best the account given in verse 38 of Luke. "She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment". This gives a graphic description of the woman whom Jesus encountered. There are several words communicating movement, action - she was standing, weeping, bathing, drying, kissing, anointing! She could very aptly be referred to as "action woman".

Incidentally, I recall a story once told by a retired British minister of religion. He was relating a most memorable incident in his life as a young probationer minister. He said that a woman who met him while he was attending a public function noticed him in his clerical garb. She came up to him, obviously having had a little too much to drink, and said, in a very endearing manner, "Vicar, I may not have faith, but I certainly got works."

The woman in the incident of Jesus at the Pharisee's home was, based on Luke's account well known for her works - "a woman in the city who was a sinner". Today we might refer to such a person as a "street woman", a "lady of the night", a "prostitute". Although described as a sinner, it must be admitted that she was not alone in the "sin", because the men of the city had been exploiting her, using her body for pleasure, therefore it was the sin of the society.

It is an historical fact, is it not, that women have always been victimized in this way. There used to be a time here in Jamaica when the air waves were flooded with



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songs degrading women, portraying them as objects for male satisfaction. Those days are passing into oblivion, as more women than men seem to be graduating from the universities here in Jamaica, more women than before are entering the medical and legal professions. Consequently, there is more respect for women, and it is now being appreciated that males and females, although divinely created to carry out different biological roles, are of equal worth in God's sight.

Jesus Christ, Son of God, has always been challenging us to stop and think before we cast accusing fingers or throw stones of condemnation at women. In the gospel of John chapter 8, we are told that Jesus was teaching in the temple when his opponents, the Scribes and Pharisees, brought a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery. The Mosaic Law had decreed that such women were to be stoned. However, by challenging all sinless men to be the first to throw a stone, Jesus was in effect saying that she had been victimized and that the men who had used her should also be stoned. The men must have asked the questions: Are we not all guilty? Are we not equally to be blamed? Jesus' approach is sympathetic, seeking to understand the person and what might have been the fundamental reason behind the woman's actions. Now we are presented with another woman who featured in His ministry as she came and anointed him. Jesus instinctively knew that something in her past must have caused her to come forward to anoint him. He was certainly seeing beyond her actions, now doubt understanding and appreciating her history and therefore not desirous of being too judgmental of her.

It is not certain who exactly this woman was. The gospel accounts in Matthew, Mark and John suggest that she was of Bethany. John even pinpoints her as Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus. Luke, based on the account given in the chapter following, veers towards an idea that this might be Mary called Magdalene from whom several demons were exorcised. But Luke does not mention her name. Nor do Matthew and Mark. She is just a woman. Action woman! With regard to the place where the scenario unfolded, Matthew, Mark and Luke all mention the home of Simon. This Simon, in Matthew and Mark's description is the "leper", whereas in Luke he is the "Pharisee", one of those who were ever critical of Jesus's actions and would obviously be judgmental and disapproving of this woman who apparently came into his house uninvited.

The anointing of Jesus by this action woman created problems. The reason is that the onlookers to the event did not understand the deep and underlying significance



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of it. It was *anointing devalued*, because in their ignorance they underestimated the significance of it. What they failed to see was the depth of love behind the action. This woman would probably have applauded Julie Andrews' singing "Don't talk of stars shining above, if you're in love show me." She deeply loved Jesus, the Son of God. Determined lover that she was, no obstacle would keep her away. She had heard where Jesus was and somehow, though not invited, found her way into the house, carrying with her a flask of ointment. Then, she got into the act - took up her position next to Jesus and anointed him.

Mark's account simply mentions anointing of the head. The Lukan account to which I alluded earlier on, has more action that could be interpreted in the woman's favour. The fact that she bypassed all others and came directly to Jesus was stating categorically that "this is the one I admire, the one whom I love, and this is where I must be, next to him". It is of significance that Jesus allowed her to get close to him. She could not face him, after all that she had done, allowing her body to be used for the pleasure of others. She was weeping - a genuine expression of grief, of sorrow over what she had thus far done with her life. She was certain that Jesus knew her life's every detail. By allowing her the closeness, he was doing exactly what God does to those who genuinely need to be "very near".

Again, Mark's account of the incident is brief and not as graphic as that given in Luke. She apparently wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head. This had implications for hospitality among the Jews, who would ensure that a visitor to the home, after a dusty journey, would require water to wash off the feet. But, horror of horrors, it also had other implications, because for a woman to wipe Jesus' feet with her hair meant that she had to literally let down her hair, and this was a shameful thing for any self-respecting woman to do in public. Her onlookers would have been judgmental, seeing her as a prostitute. She however was not prostituting herself for Jesus. True, we would respond to her actions by saying "she love him bad, bad, bad, bad" in a physical sense. But hers was a pure, sincere, genuine love for the Son of God. When you add Luke's comment about "kissing", you realize that it was not the kiss of infatuation, or the expression of erotic love of one human being for another. She was kissing "his feet" which, if seen in its true light, was intended to communicate love that went along with reverence, indeed deep respect for the Son of God.



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Mark's account says in verses 4 & 5 of chapter 14: "But some were there who said to one another in anger, 'Why was the ointment wasted in this way?'⁵ For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.' And they scolded her." John's account attributes the comment to Judas Iscariot, the disciple who would betray Jesus, the one who, it was suggested, used to steal money out of the funds received for the mission. The spectators devalued what the woman had done. They saw it as a waste of expensive ointment. But, they failed to see this action woman as one, not just of works, but of faith in Jesus Christ. They could not see the deep, abiding love that she had for Him being displayed.

Why did she love Jesus? Or why does anyone love Jesus? We need to see that God's love and care, as expressed in his Son's life on earth, would have inspired sentiments of appreciation. Jesus, full of compassion, for those who are hungry, for those who are sick, for the outcasts, those on the margins of society, allowed this woman to get close to him. The depth of appreciation for God was evident in this woman who anointed Jesus Christ. We today are challenged to a deep faith in God, by trying to see in the Son of God what this woman saw.

The woman was the recipient of God's love and mercy expressed in Jesus Christ. God makes that love available to all who would, in honesty and humility, acknowledge their sinfulness. To thieves, those addicted to substance, rapists, murderers, all who are confronted with God's love in Jesus, and feel inadequate and in need of God's attention, God's love, God's forgiveness, God's changing, the invitation is given. Be honest! Like the woman, come to Jesus. He understands your situation. Seek God's love in Christ; seek it, in faith, and you will find it.

Jesus did not devalue the woman's anointing. When the accusations were raised against her about how the ointment could have been sold and the poor benefit from it, his comment was: "She has performed a good service for me."⁷ 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.⁸ She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial.⁹ 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."



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In the final analysis, this anointing was devalued. Those who were looking on misunderstood the woman's motivation. In the more full account in Luke, it was not just an anointing of the head. It was a complete anointing, just like you would hear the stereotypical African American Pentecostal pray: "Lord, anoint the preacher from the crown of his head to the sole of his feet. Let the Holy Spirit permeate the entire being!"

This woman of Bethany who anointed Jesus was acting out a love motivation. But Jesus did not devalue the anointing, because he knew of its profound significance. Mark's gospel puts it in the following way: "Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. ⁷ 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. ⁸ She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial.

Anointing his body beforehand for its burial was yet another fact that made it a special and most valuable anointing. Jesus saw it as a prophetic act that was pointing to later in the week when his body would be brought under the control of wicked men and he be made to sleep the sleep of death. Jesus did not pretend that he wasn't going to die. He always gave the hints as well as definite statements that going to Jerusalem at the start of the week would entail His death.

The woman at Bethany was a beneficiary of divine forgiveness. We, like her, are sinners in need of that forgiveness. During this Holy Week, may we accept the invitation to get closer to Jesus Christ. In so doing, we will be changed for the better, and show love in all that we think, and say and do. No longer will our human inclination be to literally or verbally crush those who might have wronged us? No longer will we seek to be avenged on those who wrong us. Like Jesus, we will demonstrate and dramatize forgiveness, love and mercy. We will be well on the road to Christian Perfection, when we love God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind and with all our strength and our neighbour as our self. Amen!