

Anointed for Burial

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, everyone. I wonder if you've ever thought about what you would like written on your tombstone. Now, I know it's kind of a strange question for 10 o'clock on a Sunday morning, but perhaps as you've walked through a country churchyard or you've read the biography of one of your heroes, you've thought to yourself, I wonder what my epitaph would be.

Maybe it'll be heroic. Wife, mother, first woman on Mars. Or perhaps you suspect it might be like one poor bloke's which simply said, I told you I was sick.

Perhaps you're hoping for just a few kind words about your character, that you were wise, honest, loving. Or perhaps you're just holding out for something more generous than these words that were reported to have been found in one graveyard.

Here lies a man who, while he lived, was happy as a linnet. He always lied while on the earth, and now he's lying in it. Well, no matter whether you've written your own epitaph or not, most of us do wonder at some stage what legacy we'll leave or what contribution we're making now to those around us.

And that's a right and good thing to think about. I was doing some chaplaincy training at Ivanhoe Girls Grammar School last year, and I encouraged the Year 7 girls to think about what they would like to become, what type of person, rather than what they would achieve.

[1 : 4 8] And so instead of getting them to think about what would be on their tombstone, I asked them what they would like said about them at their 21st speeches. And they said things like, I want to be known as a good friend, I want people to say that I'm kind, that I'm a good listener, that I'm fun to be around.

How about you? How would you like to be spoken of at your 50th birthday party? What memorial do you hope to create from your life?

Well, in our Bible passage today, from the start of Mark chapter 15, about 14, Jesus himself provides an extraordinary memorial for one woman who lived 2,000 years ago.

Like the unknown soldier, the woman is anonymous in Mark's telling of the story. Yet what she did was so extravagant, so timely, that it would cause Jesus himself to say these words that we read in verse 9, if you've got your Bibles open.

Jesus says, 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.

[3 : 1 1] Now that is some memorial. Wherever the good news is going to be proclaimed, what this one woman has done will be told along with it.

Not on a tombstone, not in an obscure biography, wherever Jesus is spoken about, what she has done will be heard.

So friends, what was it about this woman, about her action, about this night, that led to her receiving such an amazing promise from Jesus and that led Mark to fulfill that promise by recording this story for us?

What can we learn from this passage that might see us create the kind of memorial that God wants us to have?

So as we begin to look more closely at the text, let's pray. Heavenly Father, thank you for revealing yourself to us through your word and for helping us to understand it by your spirit.

[4 : 20] please open our ears and hearts to hear what you have to say to us through this passage from Mark 14 this morning and enable us to humbly do whatever you might ask of us.

For we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. So it's dinner time in Bethany and Jesus and his companions are sharing a meal in the home of a man named Simon the leper.

We know that Jesus and his disciples have been staying in Bethany for a number of days by this point having made it their base from which to travel in and out of Jerusalem which is only about three and a half k's from there in the week leading up to the Jewish Passover festival.

Now we don't really know who Simon the leper was but we assume that he was more like Simon the ex-leper given that he is hosting a meal in his house and people are coming.

So it's not impossible that he was someone that Jesus had healed in some time earlier. But they're all sitting around a table.

[5 : 24] In fact they're reclining you might know leaning on one elbow on couches around this table and suddenly they're interrupted. A woman comes into the room unbidden not for the purpose of serving more food or clearing up the plates but rather with a small alabaster jar in her hands.

And she heads straight to Jesus and she stands behind him above him and before they know what is happening she's broken the jar and she's begun to pour it all over Jesus' head.

Well of course dinner is now officially on hold. the taste and smell of the Middle Eastern spices and the freshly baked bread that they were enjoying has just been overpowered by the pungent heady scent of this nard ointment.

All eyes are on the woman as she allows every last drop to send its aroma into the room. Now if you're anything like me at this point in the story you might be thinking what a weird and messy thing to do.

Why would you even consider pouring perfume on a man's head at a dinner party? Well we know from history and from other parts of the Bible that oils and aromatic ointments were used for health and for cosmetic aesthetic purposes and it was a custom for wealthy hosts to honour a special guest at a feast by anointing them with oil.

[7 : 13] Think about what David writes in Psalm 23 that we heard this morning where he says about God you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies you anoint my head with oil my cup overflows.

Now whatever other overtones this has at the very least it's a beautiful picture of God's hospitality and his VIP treatment of David and so I kind of think of this custom as like providing warm hand towels and moisturiser and cologne for your guests it's a bit swish but it's special but swish and special are not what have startled the guests Jesus had probably been anointed at a dinner party before we've heard him say in another story that you didn't anoint me so he's used to the custom what was it about this time that caused him to promise that it would be recounted forever it seems to me that there are two reasons why this event warranted such a memorial for this unknown woman firstly the extravagant devotion that it displayed especially in contrast to the other guests the extravagant devotion and secondly the timeliness and prophetic nature of the action in this point of Jesus life the extravagance and the timeliness firstly the extravagance you can almost see the eyes of the dinner guests widen as they realise what is in this jar that she's just smashed

Mark is kind of tripping over himself as he describes it it's like pure nard and expensive perfume it's huge and then he says not that she just pops the top off so that she can use just enough and then re-cork the bottle and take it home again no she smashes it she breaks it open every last drop is to be used no matter what the cost and the cost I mean that is just enormous we read in verse five don't we this ointment could have been sold for more than 300 denarii a denarius was about one day's wage for a labourer in Jesus day so if this alabaster jar of ointment is worth 300 denarii that's almost a year's wages for a labourer you know it's tens twenty thousand dollars it's huge it's like bottles and bottles of

Chanel or Dior perfume or a jar of you know some miracle face cream made of ingredients from the bottom of the lake in Siberia so rare that you know even Hollywood celebrities think twice about making the investment and for this woman it was probably a family heirloom because it's worth so much and so it has not only monetary significance for her but the sentimental value so she's interrupted the party to show extravagant devotion to her lord at great cost to herself and why because he's worth it she's done this extravagant thing because she places extravagant value on the person of Jesus Christ her devotion to him is such that nothing is too excessive nothing is too extravagant now even though we don't have her name in

Mark's gospel she's clearly someone who knows Jesus and when we read John's gospel we discover that she's Mary of Bethany the sister of Martha and the sister of Lazarus now if you know some of these stories about Mary and Martha you'll know that Mary sat at the feet of the teacher Jesus drinking in what he had to say and she witnessed the resurrection well the raising from the dead of her brother Lazarus she of all people is to realize that Jesus is who Mark says he is at the outset of this gospel the Messiah the son of God and so in her action she not only shows his value to her personally what he's done in her life not only honors him as a special guest in her hometown but

[12:37] I think she knows that she is showing his value in the plan of God for the world in the Old Testament kings were anointed before they began their rule and the Messiah's name Messiah means anointed one she's witnessed his works the blind can see the dead are raised salvation is preached this is the Messiah's business she's seen him enter Jerusalem as a hero in the name of David the this is kingly stuff and so you can imagine her waiting out the back of the house maybe doing some domestic duties and suddenly as she's thinking on these things what she's seen and heard it just wells up inside of her and she has to act on who she knows Jesus to be the Messiah king anointed one and so she finds the most appropriate thing she can to symbolize her faith and her devotion well friends

I wonder when did we last reflect on Jesus so that who he is welled up inside of us and caused us to show extravagant devotion to when did we last give our time our talents our money to such an excessive extent that we just glorified God for his sake when did we last make a tough decision that would mean that we would seek first God's kingdom even if it caused us great pain when have we been over the top extravagant disciples of Jesus now I don't know that it's actually very easy for us to be over the top for Jesus is it the world doesn't have a problem with religion in moderation but religion in excess that's where the opposition starts extravagance single-mindedness they're virtues when it comes to wealth success business but not when it comes to faith faith is a private hobby an add-on and so we find people around us becoming indignant if we are extravagant disciples why would you give up a promising career in engineering or teaching or medicine and go overseas to be a missionary why would you waste your time volunteering at church when you could be working going to

Sunday sport why would you choose maybe to work part time so that you can serve God and his people more why would you risk looking the fool by inviting your friends to something like introducing God why waste the potential well it's surprising I think but even Jesus friends seem to display something of this attitude in our passage today don't they have a look at verse four but some were there who said to one another in anger why was the ointment wasted in this way for this ointment could have been sold for more than 300 denarii and the money given to the poor and they scolded her the contrast is stark isn't it this unnamed woman pours out her life savings just to glorify Jesus yet those that are dining with him those in his inner circle cannot abide it and the reason they give for it is a pious one a good one the perfume could have been sold and the money could have been given to the poor the Jewish law commanded that a person should always be generous to the poor in the land and at the time of festivals like the

Passover it seems to have been a common practice to show them special kindness you know a bit like our Smith family Christmas gift trees or our Good Friday Royal Children's Hospital Appeal but at the very least their attitude shows that they've missed the point once again because we read Jesus saying in verses 6 and 7 let her alone why do you trouble her she has performed a good service for me 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 Jesus is not denying the value of giving to the poor he commands us to do it and loving one's neighbour is the second great commandment but the thing is that you don't fulfil the first great commandment love the

Lord your God with all your heart soul mind and strength just by doing the second it doesn't work that way God deserves our all our extravagant worship our devotion and Jesus says I am here amongst you you will not always have the privilege of having me here bodily I mean we know that those of us who have come after him long for the day when we will see him face to face yet these guys had him there in their midst and they didn't recognise the richness of what they had and they didn't recognise the rightness of this act of extravagant devotion and so this is what sets the woman apart from the disciples at that time and this is why we remember her to this day because she used what she had

[19 : 09] Jesus says she did what she could or what she had she did she used what was available to her to worship Jesus with everything that she was and so when we read the gospel that's why we read about her because she is a model of what it means to be transformed by the gospel to respond to Christ with extravagant love knowing that it will never be enough but being unable to hold back even one drop of our lives from him yet Jesus interprets her action in a second way that I mentioned before one that brings out the timeliness and the prophetic nature of her action which is the second reason why I think it's remembered you see it's obvious in Mark's gospel from here on in if you have a look at the passage that time is of the essence Jesus has already revealed that he'll be betrayed and killed in Jerusalem yet he and his companions have been there for some time now and nothing has happened and so the suspense has begun to build when will it happen will it happen and now

Mark tells us in verse 1 in this chapter that only two more days remain until the Passover the time each year when the Jews celebrated their deliverance from slavery in Egypt by the mighty hand of God and it's the most significant festival in the life of Israel and massive crowds would come in just as they're coming in to Melbourne for the Commonwealth Games come in from the rural areas and then they'd come in from nations outside of Israel so that they could spend the Passover in Jerusalem and I guess to mix religious metaphors Jerusalem became a real Mecca at Passover time with all the tension and heightened emotions that come with a big crowd and religious and political fervour of a pilgrimage would this be the year that the Messiah turned up to overthrow the Romans so that's why we read that the chief priests were not interested in doing something public because things were at boiling point already they didn't want the Romans to crack down if there was another riot they might lose their freedom to worship they might lose their status in the community so death is on their agenda but time is running out what the religious authorities really need is a man on the inside who will give them the intel on where

Jesus will be and when so they can find him when the crowds are gone but where will they find such a man surely Jesus wouldn't allow one of his own disciples to betray him and yet as soon as those two verses are finished where do we go to the meal at the home of Simon the leper and this action that not only symbolizes extravagant love but also the impending death of the Messiah Jesus knows that the time has come for his betrayal and for the events that will lead up to his death and he is in control Jesus says she has performed a good service for me she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial she may have understood herself to be doing that as well or she might just have thought about it being king and Messiah but what she is certainly doing

Jesus says is providing for me the burial anointing that won't be possible later on remember if you will that the women went to the tomb with their things to anoint Jesus body but he was risen Jesus is in control this is the time he is not only Jesus Messiah king but suffering servant to die as a ransom for many and this action not only symbolizes the right response to him but also that this is what he came to do so at the end of that as the disciples have shown their hearts basically Judas leaves there's no need for more delay the betrayal is at hand we read in verses 10 to 11 then Judas

Iscaiot who was one of the twelve went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them 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 and so we see the final contrast what has been predicted has been set in motion Judas one of the twelve an insider a privileged disciple reclining at the table has turned against the Lord we don't know why he chose this moment maybe Jesus defense of this woman's wastefulness finally got to him we know that money was an issue in his heart maybe he couldn't bear to hear Jesus refer to his death once again when what he wanted to say was no Jesus we need a ruler we need a warrior not a martyr we don't know and maybe we're not meant to know maybe we're meant to see that this is the type of legacy that

[24 : 52] Satan will create wherever Jesus and his agenda are not valued above all else Judas kept his extravagance for the things of the world for his pieces of silver but this anonymous woman loved extravagantly glorifying Jesus as king and the sacrifice for the sins of the whole world and what she did was given to her as a memorial to be told wherever the gospel is preached friends what type of legacy will you leave what extravagances will you be remembered for another true you say was interesting things like baby for him to god let's