

A Woman's Intuition

Mark 14:1-11

Introduction

When we were on holidays in New South Wales we commented to our friends in Orange that around their place the grass was really green. Our friends replied that although there had been some rain it was still very dry. Also, as we traveled further south the grass became greener and the weather wetter. What had made us think that orange was green was primarily because of the contrast between Orange and the Lockyer Valley.

There are times when something can make a bigger impact upon us because it stands beside something else which is starkly different. When I wake up in the night there is normally just enough light in our house that I can make my way around without any problems. However, when I have just turned off the light to go to bed the stark contrast between having bright light and then being cast into darkness means that I have to run my hands along the walls so that I don't run into things.

In this section, Mark deliberately interweaves two images of strong contrast. Mark records the story of the scheming of the chief priests and teachers of the law in their desire to arrest Jesus and of how Judas agreed to work with the chief priests to arrest Jesus at an opportune time. The wrong and evil of these events is brought out all the more clearly by Mark through him recording the story in between of the woman who expressed her devotion to Jesus by anointed him with perfume.

Let's have a look at this story to see what happened and consider how it is relevant to us too.

What A Contrast

Let's highlight the contrasts in these accounts. To start with, we have men contrasted with a woman. There are times when people want to criticise parts of the Bible as being anti-women. While I see in the Bible that men and women are equally

created in God's image it also presents differences between the sexes that extends beyond sheer anatomy. That being said, it's true that the Bible was written in particular cultural contexts and times and that some of the restrictions on women in the Bible appear to be in line with those cultural expectations. However, it's important that if we're going to look closely at where the Bible puts restrictions on women that we also take note of when the Bible writers elevate and honour women which is all the more significant in the light of those cultural considerations. This section of Mark serves as one of those stories which recognise the respected and valued position of women in the early church. Not only does Mark record this story of a devoted woman and contrasts her with men but he will also record the faithfulness of women when Jesus was on trial and punished and that women were the first witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus.

However, the contrast is not primarily between the sexes. The men in this story receive titles (the chief priests and teachers of the law) or in the case of Judas Iscariot, are named, whereas the woman is simply described as 'a woman'. The stronger contrast between the powerful and significant with the powerless and insignificant. Whenever people hold positions of power we can be tempted to trust in those positions and the authority they hold. The woman, despite having wealth tied up with the perfume, has no such authority to use or guard and so can be more free in her devotion to Jesus.

So the first contrast is between men and a woman and the second is between those with titles and recognition and one who has none. The third contrast is between those who scheme and who watched for an opportunity to betray Jesus with a woman who was perceptive of God's timing. I don't think we're being told here that the woman fully understands the significance of Jesus' approaching death but there is some perception of what is coming to pass. Jesus says in verse 8, "She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial." Following on from Jesus' instructions about the upcoming fall of Jerusalem and the end times that his disciples were to be on guard and keep watch, here is a woman who appears to have

kept watch such that she was sensitive to Jesus' work as God's Messiah and that would include his impending death.

However, while the woman was perspective to what was about to happen from a positive point of view the the chief priests were also on guard but through their scheming and their awareness of the sensitivity of the crowd, "Now the Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread were only two days away, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were scheming to arrest Jesus secretly and kill him. 'But not during the festival,' they said, 'or the people may riot.'" Likewise, Judas was also watching out. We're told, "Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them. They were delighted to hear this and promised to give him money. So he watched for an opportunity to hand him over." Unlike the woman who was perspective to what Jesus was facing, Judas was watching to see when would be a good time to betray Jesus (presumably away from the crowds).

Following on from the above, the fourth contrast concerns courage in the face of public backlash. The chief priests and teachers of the law wanted to avoid the crowds which indicates that they were both weak-willed, in that they didn't stand by their own decisions, but also that they didn't want to be on the wrong side of public opinion if possible. In contrast, what does the woman experience, "Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, 'Why this waste of perfume? It could have been sold for more than a year's wages and the money given to the poor.'" And they rebuked her harshly." We're not told explicitly who rebuked the woman but it appears to be that it was some of the disciples. Here is a woman who risks rebuke from people close to Jesus for the sake of showing her devotion to the One she follows. It may be that the woman wasn't just perceptive to the upcoming timing of Jesus' death but had felt prompted to anoint Jesus with perfumed oil to indicate her trust that Jesus was indeed God's anointed one, his Messiah, and so she courageously takes the risk of doing something extravagant which could have been, and indeed was, misunderstood.

The reason that the woman was rebuked by some of the people with Jesus was because of the extravagance of her gift and this brings out the fifth and final contrast.

As mentioned earlier, the chief priests and teachers of the law had positions of authority and we know from elsewhere in Mark that they were somewhat acting out of jealousy of Jesus. This self-seeking agenda is made explicit in the account of Judas who was promised money for betraying Jesus. In contrast to this self-seeking agenda, the woman makes a tremendous personal sacrifice to show her devotion to Jesus. “While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head.” The value of this perfume was over a year’s wage and the woman surrenders it all in an offering to Jesus.

The woman’s actions are beautiful in and of themselves but how much more powerful are they when they are interwoven between the accounts of the scheming of the chief priests and teachers of the law and the betrayal by Judas? Following on from the directives of Jesus for his followers to be on guard and to keep watch, the woman serves as an example of a person who has kept watch and so is perceptive as to Jesus’ coming death and performs a beautiful act of devotion in response to this.

Some Principles For Us

When it comes to reflecting on stories like this it can be hard at times to work out how much we can take away for ourselves. Crucially, it can be difficult to determine whether the story we’ve read is descriptive (simply describing what has happened) or prescriptive (prescribing behaviour which we should also emulate). On this occasion I would say that this account is descriptive of what the woman did and is not prescriptive for us (After all, we can’t prepare Jesus for burial by anointing him for burial). However, there are some principles which we can learn from these accounts and from the woman’s actions in particular.

The first principle is that there is a place for the extravagant. There is no hiding the fact that the woman’s gift to Jesus in the form of the perfume she used to anoint him was extravagant. The comments made in verses 4 and 5 while too harsh and not discerning of the appropriateness of the woman’s actions, are not entirely

unreasonable, “Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, “Why this waste of perfume? It could have been sold for more than a year’s wages and the money given to the poor.” And they rebuked her harshly.” The church has long struggled with encouraging people to be sensible, reliable, and not too emotional. This is understandable but there is also a place for being joyfully overwhelmed by Jesus and responding accordingly. I find sharing this first principle slightly amusing knowing a little of the traditions of the Methodist church as well as an awareness that the Presbyterian Church finds its roots in Scotland, but I think though that it’s not a bad principle that sometimes we allow ourselves to be extravagant for the sake of loving God and caring for others.

Some Christians love to bake cookies and cakes for others and will spend hours and hours preparing scrumptious blessings for a church event or to encourage people. At times people may be inclined to say, “Why bother? Just buy a packet of Arnott’s and be done with it.” It may indeed be quicker and simpler to just buy a packet of biscuits but there’s a place for extravagance in our Christian life.

Jesus’ response to the rebuke of the people to the woman helps us to develop a principle as to when extravagance is appropriate, “Leave her alone,” said Jesus. “Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial.

Extravagance for the sake of Christ and his honour is indeed appropriate. This comment by Jesus is not meant to indicate an indifference to the poor on the part of Jesus, nor that we are simply to accept that poor people will always be around and so stop caring. Rather, Jesus’ comment indicates that giving honour and allegiance to Jesus is to take the highest priority in our lives. Serving the poor, something which is clearly expected in the Scriptures, is to grow out of first being devoted to Jesus.

The first principle is that there is a place for the extravagant and the second is that devotion to Jesus takes priority, even over other well meaning endeavours.

The third principle is that when we are perceptive about what God is doing and we respond to that movement of God in whole-hearted, sometimes extravagant, devotion our actions have a lasting impact. I love Jesus' words here, "Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her." These words ring true every time people like us read this story. What a wonderful affirmation to this woman and how she stands in stark contrast to the chief priests, teachers of the law and Judas Iscariot.

However, lasting impact isn't only found in the actions of this woman. You may never hear it directly, but what would it mean to you if you were to hear that there is someone who tells their story of becoming a Christian and your love for Jesus and the reality of your faith is what impacted them. Because of your true view of Jesus you helped another to see the meaning of Jesus' death and your hope opened their eyes to the victory of the resurrection. Now that's a principle worth living out!

[We're now going to respond to God in a song which declares that we're, "No Longer Slaves." As we sing this song reflect on the extravagance of this woman who gave so generously because she experienced a freedom in being devoted to Jesus. Consider how you might like to also joyfully respond to God's work for you and in you.]