

Reflections for Lent 2021 – Why did Jesus die? Session 3
Based on ‘Journey to the Empty Tomb’ by Paula Gooder, Canterbury Press, 2014

Session 3 – Between the Cleansing of the Temple and the Last Supper: a tale of two women

Read Mark 12.13 - 14.9. Matthew, Mark and Luke have Jesus involved in a range of conversations between the Cleansing of the Temple and the preparation for the Last Supper. Some are common to all three gospels: question about tax; question about resurrection; Jesus asks a question about the Messiah; beware the scribes; signs of the end; Judas’ decision to deny Jesus. Matthew adds others: parable of the bridesmaids, parable of the talents; parable of the sheep and goats. One or two are in Matthew and Mark, such as the anointing of Jesus’ feet. On the other hand, the story of the widow’s mite is only in Mark and Luke, and Mark omits the story of Jesus’ lament over Jerusalem – which is in Matthew and Luke. The focus on all the gospels at this point is on Jesus’ increasing conflict with the Jewish authorities. They questioned him about tax, the law, resurrection. Jesus replied by questioning them about their attitude to the Messiah, and by pointing to the future and the signs of the end.

Mark 12.41-44 (Luke 21.1-4) – The Widow’s Gift. The widow in this well-known story symbolises for both Mark and Luke a person whose attitude to God is right, unlike the questioning scribes. This widow was not seeking her own glory or exploiting others for her own benefit, but instead responded to the generosity of God out of the little that she had with a generosity of her own. She had very little but she threw in two coins, giving the most she could. This was not temple tax, as women were exempt from that payment. This was a free-will offering of the most she could from the little she had.

Mark 14.3-9 (Matthew 26.6-13; Luke 7.36-50; John 12.1-9) – The Anointing of Jesus. Each of the four gospels has a story about the anointing of Jesus by a woman. But because the story is so familiar to us we have tended to harmonise the details. Was Jesus anointed on his head, or his feet? Matthew & Mark say head, Luke & John say feet. What was the location? Matthew, Mark and John say Bethany, Luke says Galilee. Who was the dinner party host? Matthew and Mark say Simon the Leper, Luke has Simon the Pharisee, John has Lazarus. Who was the woman? Only John gives her the name ‘Mary’. Who objected to the anointing? The disciples, or ‘someone’, or Simon, or Judas – each gospel names someone different. What was the anointing for? Luke says it was the woman’s acknowledgement of her need for forgiveness. The other three gospels see it as signifying Jesus’ coming burial.

The tradition of anointing the head with oil is well known in the bible (Psalm 23.5; Amos 6.6). It is seen as a sign of blessing to the recipient. Luke’s account of the event and the washing of Jesus feet is very different and harder to understand its meaning. For the other gospels this anointing is a symbolic act highlighting Jesus’ coming death and burial. In Mark, this unnamed woman is revealing herself as a true disciple of Jesus, just like the widow in chapter 12. In Mark, when groups respond to Jesus they invariably react wrongly: the leaders are always opposed, the crowd mostly amazed and quickly disinterested, and the disciples often confused and lacking in understanding. In contrast individuals, who know their need of God, respond to Jesus as he is and recognise him to be who he is. This woman recognised something of God in the man Jesus and responded with an open generous heart, and her actions spoke much louder than words.

The poor widow and the unnamed woman with a jar of scented oil recognised Jesus for who he really was and responded to the best of their ability. The crowds and the religious authorities turned away. They could not see Jesus for who he really was, partly because if he was the long-awaited Messiah he was so unlike what they were expecting, and his teaching so revolutionary, that their world would be turned upside down. They had a lot to lose.

- **Are you held back in your response to Jesus by fears of what you might lose? What might those things be? Spend some time reflecting on them while sat quietly in God’s presence, and ask God’s generous love to fill up your heart and your life.**