

John 12:1-8 What matters most?

Introduction

During my summer holiday I had the opportunity to read Eric Metaxas' biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It was a pleasure to read as I learned so much from its pages about life as a Christian in an increasingly hostile Nazi Germany. Towards the end of the book it details Bonhoeffer's arrest and imprisonments alongside other key leaders of the German Resistance Movement. One of the incidental details that stood out was the decreasing amount of personal property each person was able to take with them as they moved closer to the Concentration Camp where they would be executed for their faith. For Bonhoeffer a Bible and a book of German poetry by Goethe and Plutarch's *Lives of Roman Emperors* were his precious possessions in those final days (p.526). The witnesses of his execution were amazed at his calmness of spirit and his time of prayer before his work on earth was concluded. The camp doctor remarked: 'In the almost fifty years I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God.' (p.532). Of the things you possess what would be the handful of items you would chose if you were forced in to that position? Bonhoeffer treasured his books, especially his Bible, but we all have things that have a special significance to us for a whole variety of reasons. Here in this passage of Scripture it is very likely that we read about Mary's special treasure – a jar of expensive perfume. Yet we cannot jump to the conclusion that this woman had an expensive taste in perfume because it is most likely that it was a family heirloom that had been handed down to her as the equivalent of life insurance or money set aside for times of hardship. She would never have entertained the thought of using it on herself. Something extraordinary had happened to allow her to think of opening that clay jar that evening. What matters most to you and me? Sometimes there are hard choices to make which will be determined to a significant degree by the value we place on the people and possessions we are associated with. What was it that Mary had grasped about Jesus that led her to take this extraordinary step which was recounted in three of the four Gospels?

1. The Choices we make (John 12:1-2)

Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.² Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honour. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with Him (John 12:1-2). Matthew (Matthew 26:6-13) and Mark (Mark 14: 1-11) refer to the same meal as John, but only the latter gives us the clear details of the chronology of when it took place and why. The chronology of that first Easter week suggests that this is a Saturday evening meal taking place at the conclusion of the Sabbath. It is a happy meal in the village where Jesus felt so welcome amongst friends in a community not far from Jerusalem. It is especially filled with joy at that time because it was only a short time ago on His previous visit to the village that Lazarus his friend had been raised from the dead. No-one who had been present that day and witnessed Jesus order a dead man to come out of a tomb and observed that extraordinary miracle would ever forget it to their dying day. Yet the reaction to the miracle was exceedingly mixed with great joy for some, but overwhelming anger on the part of the Jewish Religious authorities who were absolutely committed to eliminating Jesus. John 11: 47b-53 states: *'What are we accomplishing?' they asked. 'Here is this man performing many signs.'⁴⁸ If we let Him go on like this, everyone will believe in Him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation.'⁴⁹ Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, 'You know nothing at all!⁵⁰ You do not realise that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.'*

⁵¹ He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, ⁵² and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one. ⁵³ **So from that day on they plotted to take His life.** The same event had inspired two completely different responses. The reason why this was the case was that the two groups of people involved had different priorities. What mattered most to the people of Bethany was of no interest to the religious leaders of the nation, barely two miles away; what matters most to you and me will be very different to some of your colleagues at work or neighbours in your street. Their values and principles may have been shaped by some very different convictions. On this occasion a man called Simon provided his home for the meal. Other people in the village undoubtedly organised a scheme to provide the necessary food for the collective meal. Martha as we would have expected was a key facilitator serving the food that evening. John reminds us that *Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with Him* (John 12:2b). The most obvious reason for mentioning this fact is because of its proximity to his extraordinary restoration to life after death. The picture before us is a beautiful one of community harmony and mutual blessing. They were motivated by a common conviction of love for Jesus. In the work of this congregation, and indeed in every other genuine Christian Church, the service we offer and the way in which we relate to one another ought to be motivated by our dedication to Him. It does not mean we will always see eye to eye on everything or that we will naturally become best friends with everyone who ventures through the doors for Sunday worship services, but if we are truly His followers then grace and humility and practical Christian love will be evident in the way we relate to one another. We need to hold one another to account to maintain Christ-like standards in our relationships because what matters most is that we are pleasing our precious Lord and Saviour. Is there something I need to work on in my life just now to enable me to become more like Jesus as I relate to other people in my family or my church family or in some other context? Take some quiet time to allow the Holy Spirit to guide our thinking –if there is something He wants to speak to us about at this time.

2. **The consequences of our choices** (John 12:3)

³ *Then Mary took about half a litre of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped His feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.* (a) **The past** There would have been people everywhere but Mary had her eyes fixed only on one person that evening. It didn't matter what other people thought about what she was going to do as long as Jesus appreciated it. Although there is much about the lives of the members of this Bethany family that we do not know we are fairly certain that Jesus had a transforming life-changing impact on Mary's life. It is possible as is often assumed by scholars that she had previously made some bad choices in life but her encounter with Jesus brought about an amazing restoration to a God-centred way of living. For the rest of her days she would keep her focus on what matters most to God. Nothing will be too much trouble for her to endeavour to please the one who has brought her so close to God. The first encounter with Jesus corrected her sense of priorities and life-purpose. Is there anyone here who has never put your faith and trust in God through Jesus? If that is you, can I urge you even today to take that step and acknowledge Him as Lord of your life. There is no more significant decision you will make in the whole of the rest of your life than the one to accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour. He willingly laid down His life for you on the cross that you might be welcomed into His family. Through faith in Him your sins are forgiven and you have peace with God and know that your eternal future is taken care of; allowing you to focus on being the best you can be for God in the years He has given us on earth. (b) **The present** Prior to her

encounter with Jesus what mattered most to Mary might have been a very different set of preferences to the ones she would have stated in the years that followed. The consistency of her devotion to Jesus was exemplary. How are you and I getting on in our love for the Lord? It is easy to allow it to cool and allow ourselves to get into a good Christian routine of activities but let slip the enthusiasm or the passion for what He desires from us. Sadly sometimes we can be saying the right words and doing the right things but our hearts and minds are in another place. If we need to rekindle our joy in the Lord today - don't be afraid to ask the Lord to restore the joy of our salvation.

Was this action premeditated? A case could be made that this celebration so soon after Lazarus' restoration to life, had caused Mary to overflow with even more joy than usual in the Lord's presence. The community would have needed some hours to prepare for this feast so it is possible that she could have considered how best to show her devotion to the most precious person in her life. There is a definite place for carefully planning how best to use our time and talents in serving the Lord. Mary was a person who would have identified with the words of King David, who in I Chronicles 21:24 declared to a Jebusite landowner that his faith was real and would be lived out in practice –it was much more than mere words : *But King David replied to Araunah, 'No, I insist on paying the full price. I will not take for the Lord what is yours, or sacrifice a burnt offering that costs me nothing.'* What she would do that evening would be very costly. The most effective Christians in God's service have demonstrated that they too have been willing to put themselves out for the Lord and in His name for other people. Paul's challenge to us in Romans 12:1-2 is a serious challenge to grasp. *Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. ²Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – His good, pleasing and perfect will.* Is there an area of your life not yielded to Him – as a Christian? Is what matters most to me in line with how He would want me to think and speak and act? In I Corinthians 14:1(NLV) Paul wrote: *Let love (αγαπε-practical care and devotion) be your highest goal!* It will not happen by chance it is a conscious choice to live this way. I want to thank the Lord for the many occasions when I have witnessed practical Christian love and care within this congregation and on other occasions towards people who are in the wider community. Observing a fellow believer living this way is inspirational. We don't model Christ-like love to impress other people but we do it to please Him. Do you / do I need to look at how our lifestyle choices are impacting on our children or grandchildren or on other people we meet with regularly at work or amongst our neighbours? Do other people see that our faith and commitment to Jesus really does shape our choices without us needing to hold up a banner to declare it! What matters most to us will be the things we talk about, think about and chose to do in the hours we have control over in daily life.

There is a place too for spontaneous acts of kindness and Christian love. Sometimes events just happen in front of us and our natural response is to be the person who gives the helping hand to a stranger before quickly going on our way. It is great from time to time to read in the newspapers of good Samaritans of various kinds whose acts of generosity have made a huge difference in someone's life. However long Mary had to think about what she did that evening there is no doubt that her actions would have caught everyone's attention who witnessed it. John tells us (John 12:3) *Then Mary took about half a litre of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped His feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.* The quantity of this product used, and had to be used, because the jar was deliberately broken was more than the token amount to anoint a head or feet –it was a generous quantity sufficient to anoint a whole body (Mark 14:3: *Meanwhile, Jesus was in*

Bethany at the home of Simon, a man who had previously had leprosy. While He was eating, a woman came in with a beautiful alabaster jar of expensive perfume made from essence of nard. She broke open the jar and poured the perfume over His head.) It was an act of outrageous generosity. We need to remember that people reclined at tables then on their left sides with their feet out away from the table. It was, therefore, much easier for Mary to anoint Jesus' head and feet then than it would be today when people are seated in our conventional fashion around a dining room table. Mary had given her very best to Jesus and had done so willingly. In your service for the Lord –do you endeavour to do your best for Him? We do that not because He can see all we do but because of our love for Him we want to demonstrate that love in a practical manner as we serve in His name. Paul wrote these words to the Church at Corinth in II Corinthians 5:9-10: ***So we make it our goal to please Him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it.***¹⁰ *For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due to us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.* Mary certainly would have said her 'Amen' to these words. Is that your supreme motivating force behind the choices you make? Or do we need to stop and ask the Lord to rekindle our commitment to Him?

In John's account there is a focus on humility as she anoints His feet and lets down her hair to wipe them – something unheard of in polite Jewish society of that day! What mattered most to Mary was that Jesus had been reminded of her devotion to Him in a very practical way. It is most likely that she was not aware that Jesus would be in a tomb –dead- a week later. We too never know the full significance of our acts of kindness or words of witness. Sometimes it is years later before a spiritual seed planted in someone's life comes to fruition. May we have the grace to trust God with the results of our actions and prayerfully seek His power on a daily basis to live appropriately for Him.

3. **The controversy that erupted** (John 12:4-6)

⁴ *But one of His disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray Him, objected,*⁵ *'Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages.'*⁶ *He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.* We know that we can never please all the people all of the time! However, some people will never be pleased with us no matter what we do to assist them! Judas would never comprehend how anyone could be so generous like this. His greedy grasping nature sadly caused him to view to actions of others in the light of how he would have behaved, which was not for the common good. He must have been seriously outraged here to voice his annoyance in a public crowd. His words sounded incredibly pious. The problem was that he actually had no interest in the poor at all. He begrudged any assistance they were receiving. The valuation figure he claimed for this perfume stood uncorrected so we are looking at a product that sells for the equivalent of a year's wages. When God's people are incredibly generous to the Lord and His work they will receive a blessing from Him for their Christ-like actions. It is also a good witness to people outside the fellowship to see a faith that is lived out in daily life. We need to remember that people will pass judgement on your words and actions and mine. How they view us may be quite wrong because it may be based on incomplete information, but sometimes we have to live with people questioning our motivation or actions. What is most important is that the Lord knows and takes delight in the choices we make, because they are in line with His plan and purpose for us. Is there anyone here struggling because the words or actions of someone else who has misunderstood you caused you some heartache and pain? Let someone pray with you over this matter today- if this is your experience. We need to leave our burdens with the Lord. Psalm 55: 22 reminds us: *Cast your cares on the Lord and He will sustain you; He will never let*

the righteous be shaken. Peter, likewise, in I Peter 5:7 declares: *Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you.* When you know that what matters most is God's love for you, it can give us the strength and assurance to carry on in even very difficult times. How sad for the Judas' of this world to keep getting a wrong view of the choices of other people –but God can change their hearts – so may we never stop praying for people who need Him for salvation and for others who need God to grant them a new vision of their identity in Christ and its implications for their relationships with other people.

4. **The commendation that was given** (John 12:7-8)

'Leave her alone,' Jesus replied. 'It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. ⁸ You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have Me' (John 12:7-8). When Jesus commends you anything else is of secondary significance! Judas must have been confident of expressing a majority unspoken view when he voiced his criticism of Mary's actions. But did he? The loudest voices are not always representative of the majority opinion in a given context. In a context where hospitality was valued and Jesus so highly thought of, it was most surprising that Judas so badly misjudged this situation; Yet Jesus' words of commendation must also have given His hearers a shock. Here is a healthy man in his 30s who is reclining close to a man He has restored to life yet here He hints at His own death. Undoubtedly Mary was unaware of the full significance of her actions when she poured this perfume on Jesus. Likewise when you and I are prompted by the Holy Spirit to call someone or visit them we may have no idea why that is the right thing to do. There is 100% certainty that she never conceived that people would be talking about her actions two thousand years later across the world! We need to sense that our investments in people's lives may be more significant than we ever realised, likewise theirs in our lives. What matters most is that we are open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit to be there for other people –maybe at work or in some other setting not necessarily in a church context. Too often we make the mistake of thinking that only big things count –most of the time what someone may need is a word of encouragement or a little bit of your time. Mary is a model to us here in that she did what God prompted her to do- that is what matters most! The monetary value of that perfume at the time was not in her thoughts. Jesus went on to say that He has to have first place in our lives. There will always be work to do, needs that could be met, and the in-tray at work will rarely be empty! What matters most is honouring Him and giving Him His due place in our lives. When that is taken care of our relationships with other people ought also to be healthy, because we serve One who modelled compassion for others. What words of commendation might Jesus want to give you today? What words of challenge might He raise for action? May He direct us through this inspiring story to see with insight what matters most for us today, Amen.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. According to John 12:2 what was the purpose of the gathering in Bethany? Why do you think the community was so pleased to mark this occasion? (See John 11:1-44)
2. In I Chronicles 21:24 we see King David asking to purchase what he needed to worship the Lord. How is his response in verse 24 similar to Mary's actions in John 12:3-5?
3. Did the event in Bethany witness only Mary's action of generosity? (Matthew 26:6-13 & John 12:1-2) What other contributions were made that day? It is a reminder that Mary's action took place in the context of a welcoming community
4. Mary's extraordinary act of unconditional love was not hindered by the financial cost of her actions. Why is it hard to show this kind of love to other people?
5. Judas' reaction in public to this action is decidedly negative? Have you ever had a negative reaction to an act of kindness to someone? Why do you think there is such a clear misunderstanding of her motivation here?
6. How did Jesus view the significance of her actions? (See John 12:7-8 & Matthew 26:10-13; if Mary had no idea of the implications for her actions –what encouragement might it give us today in engaging in acts of generosity?