

## SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 43:16–21

Philippians 3:4b–14

John 12:1–8

### Mary Anoints Jesus

1 Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 2 There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. 3 Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. 4 But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 5 "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" 6 (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) 7 Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. 8 You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

## SERMON: NEW BEGINNINGS

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

This morning we read John's account of the anointing of Jesus. This event appears in all four of the Gospels, Mark, Matthew, Luke and John.

Have you ever compared the stories in the different gospels? Often we find the same event described by four different authors – each has their own perspective, each has their own particular slant. While the main thrust of the story remains the same, the variances in the details draws our attention and focus to different places. We get fresh insights by reading the diverse viewpoints.

In this case, Mark, Matthew and John tell about this event in very similar ways – many of the words are exactly the same – but there is one key difference.

The basic event happened like this: Jesus was eating, he was anointed with oil, and somebody complained about this being a waste of money – the expensive perfumed oil should have been sold and the money used to feed the poor.

In Mark's gospel – the first gospel that was written – it reads 'some of those present said Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' In Matthew we read 'some of the disciples said Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' It's getting a little more specific now.

By the time John's gospel was written, in this story it is no longer some of the people present, nor some of the disciples, but it is specifically Judas who complains about this waste of money. Judas. The bad guy.

Judas has been singled out here, and there is a reason given as to why it was he who was complaining. It says that Judas said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse, he was the treasurer for Jesus' troop, and he used to pilfer what he carried.

This is a pretty bold statement. Was Judas a thief – an embezzler? We already know that he sold out Jesus for 30 pieces of silver, but we're also told that he threw the money back in the face of the high priest after Jesus was taken.

There is no doubt that Judas did betray Jesus, but it doesn't seem as though he did it for the money. Maybe he agreed with Caiaphas that it was better for one man to die than for the whole city to pay for the uproar Jesus was causing. We don't really know for sure, but it would seem as though Judas was probably more greedy for power or praise than he was for money. But here he is being accused of stealing from the common fund. Why?

In the Greek New Testament it doesn't actually say that Judas stole anything – it says that Judas carried the common purse – βαστάζω. It is when the New Testament is translated into English that the word carried seems to get changed into carried off or pilfered.

In fact, the stealing really appears to be a later interpretation. The line that directly states that Judas was a thief is not present in the earliest manuscripts of the bible. That is why the sentence appears in brackets. It would appear that some overzealous copyist wanted to make sure that we knew that Judas was bad news and added an editorial comment that went viral and is now printed in most modern bibles.

Having said that, I want to reassure you a little. The bible does contain some things that were not in the original manuscripts. When we go through the bible line by line we are able to find some errors and inconsistencies. That doesn't make the bible wrong. It doesn't mean that our foundations are shaken.

The bible was, is, and always will be a collection of books inspired by God; our scriptures are inbreathed with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit inspired the writers, and that same Spirit inspires the readers. The Spirit in you is what enables you to discern truth – don't underestimate the power of that Spirit to steer you around distractions or obstacles. We will receive the truth, if that is what we desire and pray for.

For his own reasons God chose to have his written word mediated through men and women – imperfect human beings using imperfect words – but he oversees the whole project through the Holy Spirit. The written word is governed by the Living Word, so you don't have to worry that the bible is somehow being weakened, or being held in low regard.

But, to return to this accusation against Judas, the fact that it was an all too human insertion actually serves to emphasize the point of this sermon.

We see a progression in the gospels from some people complaining, to some disciples complaining, to Judas complaining because he carried the groups' money, to finally Judas complaining because he was a thief as well as a betrayer.

Judas has been demonized – objectified as a totally evil and depraved man. It seems that the reasoning goes like this: Judas betrayed Jesus, he is corrupt, and so therefore he is likely also a thief, likely a drinker, a liar, generally a scoundrel – probably he smells offensive as well.

We tend to do this to people – we take their worst characteristic and we extend it to every aspect of their lives. We're uncomfortable with shades of grey – so we paint people as either black or white. It's all or nothing, you're good, or you're evil. There can be no in between.

As we look around us we see that this is true. Once a public figure falls from grace, then everything about them is suddenly tainted, and this seems to be accelerating.

When actors and musicians are accused of wrong behaviour it doesn't just affect their present and future careers; all their past works are pulled from the airways to be seen and heard no more. Titles are stripped from people, statues torn down, monuments destroyed. There seems to be a desire to write those people we disapprove of from history. Society seems to be quite zealous these days about removing impurities and undesirables.

The thing that we forget though, is that the line that divides good and evil doesn't just run between 'us and them,' but actually cuts right through each of us. We like to judge people like Judas – he betrayed our Lord – what a cad! Obviously he's not at all like us so we can freely condemn him as being purely evil.

But when I read what is actually written about him, he isn't so bad. He didn't do anything wrong until that one bad decision. He was deceived, misled, and he made a terrible choice. Now, to be fair, that one mistake was a big one – it was no speeding ticket – but he messed up one time. He tried to give the money back, but that didn't fix anything, and he was so burdened by his sin that he killed himself.

Now that sounds a lot more like me than I would generally care to admit. I screw up, I can't fix it, and then I'm left wondering how I can possibly live with my actions. Does that sin now define me? Is that all that I am now?

The driver that caused the Humboldt tragedy was recently sentenced. He will forever be known as the one who destroyed the Broncos.

How would you like to be defined by your worst characteristic? To be known and judged by the world for the worst thing you have ever done? Is your worst action the one that will define you for the rest of your life?

This is how we are as humans. We see the worst, and then we use that to paint the entire person. This isn't just something the police do, or that happens to famous people in the tabloids. We do it to each other with our gossip. We whisper to each other – he got arrested for drunk driving, she cheated on her husband, that one got fired for stealing. This is how it is, under the sun. This is what that extra line in today's reading is – it's a whisper over a back fence. The editor who added the comment was clearly displaying the very human tendency to judge people at their worst.

Fortunately, God's ways are far better than our ways.

As Easter approaches it is key for us to remember that the message of the resurrection is that the worst word is not the last word.

God chooses not to label us based on our worst moment. Of course God sees all the bad stuff – he sees more of us than we do ourselves - but God chooses not to trap us forever in the worst thing we have done.

Our scripture from Isaiah this morning reads:

18 Do not remember the former things,  
or consider the things of old.  
19 I am about to do a new thing;  
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

Do not remember the former things. This doesn't mean that we just ignore the past, but it does mean that we don't dwell in the past; we don't continually rehash old wounds. We learn from them, grow, and move on.

Paul reminds us that we need to put our deeds and our outward appearances in proper perspective. He writes of his qualifications for righteousness: that he was circumcised on the eighth day according to Jewish custom, is a member of God's people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews – a pureblood; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. He is saying that he has done all the right things; he is a man of whom nobody can whisper – nobody has any dirt on him. And yet to Paul that all means nothing. Paul actually uses a bad word here and says that all his qualifications for righteousness are a pile of crap, but using stronger language than I.

Paul says that his good works don't make him good with God – it's only the faith of Christ that redeems him.

What we can learn from this is that if Paul's blameless life does not make him righteous, if his actions don't redeem him, then the opposite must also be true. Our blameful lives cannot make us unredeemable. That is because God does not categorize us based purely upon our worst deeds.

This does not mean that our worst actions have no consequence. While God may choose to not remember – Satan certainly will. The thief comes to kill and destroy, and Satan will attack you where you are weakest. The deceiver will continually remind you of your shameful moments, and will colour your entire self-image with that darkness. With enough of this we begin to give up. We believe the lie. In the same way that since Judas was a betrayer he must also be a thief, so also it is with us.

We begin to believe that our worst moments define our whole being – we tell ourselves things like I guess I'm just no good. I'll never amount to anything. I've always been this way. It's too late to change now. These things are not true. These are Satan's words, not God's words. But these words will continue to have power until we have experienced forgiveness. Real forgiveness.

But real forgiveness only comes after honest confession. You can't forgive me for backing into your car if I don't admit that I've done it. I can't receive your forgiveness as long as I'm making excuses and justifying myself. Real repentance means real honesty – it means no more excuses, no more pretending.

Yesterday I listened to Andy Cornell speak about how we don't confess nearly enough anymore. Perhaps it's because we are all too aware of the human proclivity to condemn – we don't like to be reminded of our sin. But the solution to sin is not to deny or ignore it, but to confess it. Confession is cleansing.

Confession is the difficult step that we need to go through so that God will remember our sins no more, and so we also no longer have to have our sins continually replay in our heads. Repentance shuts up the accuser who says we are nothing more than our worst moment.

So as we prepare for the new life of Easter, let's pray together and before God and let go of one of our demons. We'll do it together.

Please bow your heads.

Think of something that you have done that still haunts you. We have all done something so shameful that we would die if we thought anyone else knew – we all have a secret that will not let us have peace.

Bring that event to mind.

Feel the sorrow

Confess to god

Ask for forgiveness

Resolve to rectify the effects of our sin

Forsake sin

Receive forgiveness

This is the good news of the gospel,  
and it is for you and for all.  
Whatever you have done,  
whatever you have failed to do,  
whoever you are,  
whoever you wish you were but are not:  
You are accepted, you are welcomed.  
You are washed clean, you are raised up.  
The worst word is not God's last word.  
You are forgiven, you are set free.  
With the love of Jesus Christ, you are loved - forever.  
Amen.