

BREAKING THE JAR

(Mark 14.1-11)

Today we are thinking of a story of extraordinary generosity, when a woman showed her love, gratitude and respect for Jesus. We will be reflecting on what the story means for us today and how we can put Jesus first in our lives.

There is a village in County Durham called Blackhall Colliery - some of us may have been there or at least travelled through it. Blackhall Colliery was in the news in 2014. A member of the public had found a packet containing £2,000 in bank notes, handed it in to the police who returned to the person who had found it when nobody claimed it.

Subsequently the same thing happened on a total of 13 occasions - each time there was a packet containing £2,000 in banknotes found by a member of the public, handed in to the police and returned in due course to the person who found it.

The mystery of Blackhall Colliery. Police had some concerns that it might be a confused or vulnerable person giving the money away. Others thought that it was due to a "Good Samaritan" who wanted to help people. They were proved to be correct.

In January of this year two people contacted the police; they had had unexpected windfalls and told police wanted to give something back. One of them had had an "emotional connection" after being helped by one of the residents and wanted to repay the kindness received so deliberately left the money where it would be found by people in need including pensioners and people falling on hard times.

The two people concerned remain anonymous. It was a story of "extraordinary generosity." Or if we would like to be poetic, they had "an attitude of gratitude."

Today, we have heard the Biblical story of the gift of extreme generosity.

Mark is the shortest of the Gospels – just 16 Chapters or 20 pages in most Bibles. However, this story is included just as the same or a very similar story is also in the other three Gospels- one of those names the woman as Mary, sister of Martha at Bethany.

Our reading today from Chapter 14 starts with two very serious verses telling of the sly plans of the chief priests and teachers of the law to arrest and kill Jesus. The reading concludes with the equally grim account of Judas planning to betray Jesus. In between these there are seven verses that tell the story of the woman anointing Jesus with oil.

It was the custom of the time to put some oil on the head of a guest as a sign of welcome and respect. However, the woman went far beyond what might have been expected. We are told that the very expensive perfume (or nard; that may have come all the way from India to Palestine) was in an alabaster jar that was broken. It may well have been a family heirloom that was being kept for a “rainy day”. It was worth more than a year’s wages. There were no half measures- once the jar was broken it was going to be used and gone. The woman “broke the jar,” put Jesus first and kept nothing back.

What would that be worth today? Let us think what our own income, either wages or pension have received over the last year or what we have spent over the last year.

Let us then think of the same value being invested in a possession, perhaps a valuable picture or antique furniture. What would our reaction be if a friend or family member had sold that valuable item and given all the money away to a Christian leader or ministry? We might have had concerns like the police had when bundles of notes were found in Blackhall Colliery.

Many of us would have even greater concerns if the money had been spent on a one-off celebration such as a banquet or firework display? We would be worried – are they in their right mind? Do they know what they are doing? Then we might well be thinking like the people present in their story “Why this waste?” Could that money not have been better used?

Likewise, in the story here there was opposition to what she had done:

- Indignation
- Criticism- why waste?
- Challenge actions
- Rebuke / Persecution

Today, if we step out in faith and do something that puts God first how we use out time or resources we may well face opposition, criticism, challenge and possibly even persecution.

Without doubt this was a very sacrificial gift by this woman. Why did she do it? She did it to show her love appreciation and respect for Jesus.

Like the people who left the banknotes in Blackhall – she had an “attitude of gratitude;” she wanted to “give something back.” However, not anonymously and not to the poor, but to Jesus. In our first Bible reading this morning the Psalmist wrote- “When we were overwhelmed by sins, you forgave our transgressions.” Likewise, the woman deeply appreciated Jesus for what he had done for her; freeing her from evil and forgiving her.

We all have much to be thankful for. Psalm 65 expresses many thanks; for creation, the world’s beauty and the Lord’s provision. Let us too be thankful for all that God has done and is continuing to do for us in our lives, particularly as we approach Easter remember how Jesus died for us.

The woman may or may not have understood at that stage that Jesus was likely to be killed. She may or may not have thought through that she would suffer criticism and rebuke for her actions.

How did Jesus respond? (verses 6-9)

About the woman herself:

- Leave her alone
- Why are you bothering her?
- She has done a beautiful thing

The perspective of the poor:

-Poor always have with you and can help them any time you want
It was the Jewish custom to specially remember the poor at the time of the Passover. A verse that would have been familiar in those days was: Deuteronomy 15.11. "There will always be poor people with you in the land. I command you to be open handed towards your brothers and towards the poor and needy in the land."

Referred to himself

- You won't always have Jesus
- She did what she could (what women could do as followers of Jesus in those days would have been more limited)
- Prepared me for burial

Jesus also looked forward to beyond his death and resurrection-

- Wherever Gospel is preached throughout the world this story will be told.

A challenge to us; what if any stories about us will be told in the future? Will they give glory to God?

Our Lord summarised the Old Testament law as "Love God with all your hearts, mind, soul and strength and your neighbour as yourself." To love God is the first command. Loving neighbour is the second command.

Or as Jesus said in the Sermon on the mount; "seek first his kingdom and all these things will be added unto you."

If we do put God first, we are in a better position to love our neighbours.

What it means to give extravagantly and generously to God and to put God first will differ for us all.

- It may mean time in prayer, possibly getting up earlier in the mornings to pray and read God's word.
- It may mean stopping doing things.
- It may mean using our time in a way that prioritises others.
- It may involve of giving- perhaps to buildings that give glory to God.

Just as in this church we have a lovely stained glass window at the back which was funded by previous generations of believers to give glory to God.

When we are focusing on God and putting him first, we may well be challenged to love our neighbours more too:

- Time
- Prayer
- Giving
- New areas

Again, it's different for us all. So this Lent, as we lead up to Easter, may we pray for the Holy Spirit to lead us how we can put Jesus first in a generous and sacrificial way, and as we do so remember the woman breaking the jar and anointing Jesus.