

“Close Encounters on the Way to the Cross: The Anointing at Bethany”

Date: 24 March 2019

Text: Matthew 26.6 - 13

Rev. Peter Coutts

As a Baby Boomer, I am a part of what was called “the Me Generation”, a phrase in which there is some truth. Taken as a collective Boomers tended to be more self-absorbed than our parent’s generation. The phrase, while describing reality, was also meant to be somewhat derogatory. So we were not at all upset when Generation X came along and social commentators labeled them the real Me Generation. Time passed, and Macleans Magazine published an article with the title, “Study Confirms Millenials are Generation Me.” But while this dubious honour is being passed along in a generational relay race, it has now been applied to all those under the age of 73. Now, while we might agree that this is true about others, I don’t think anyone would say it is true about ourselves. No one would claim they are self-absorbed, that “the world revolves around me”. I would guess the singer Kanye West would say he’s not self-absorbed, even though he told an interviewer recently, “The Bible has about 40 or 50 characters in it. Don’t you think that if there was a modern Bible that I would be one of its characters?”

As we compare ourselves to people like this, we can feel a bit of confidence that we don’t live our lives as if the world revolves around us! Look at them! They are self-absorbed. It’s appealing to make people on that end of the spectrum the standard by which we measure ourselves. “I am not like that.” But that’s as we look one way along a spectrum. Our scripture lesson today asks us to turn around and compare ourselves to a woman. If people like Kanye are one extreme, then this woman, in this one simple act, is the other. We don’t know her name, or who she was, or why she was there. We know nothing about her. All we have about her is one sentence which describes very simply what she did. “A woman came to Jesus with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, and she poured it on his head as he sat at the table”.

Why did she do it? What did it mean? Why now? The woman herself provides no clues. But we hear a few insights from Jesus. He said, “She has performed a good service for me”. It was an act of honouring Jesus. To honour is to show great respect, like the world has for the Dalai Lama. It can be to give one’s allegiance to another, like Roman Catholic Christians do to the Pope. To honour is to acknowledge another’s exalted position – like we honour the Queen. When we give another honour we say that person is a person of distinction or achievement, like the honour given to a Olympic Gold Medalist. Honour is a sign of appreciation for a great deed done, such as we have for Terry Fox. To honour is to

give another glory, as we do to God. Honour is not an easy idea, but we can begin to grasp the depths of its meaning through examples like these. Honour is what this anonymous woman offered Jesus in that “good service”: respect, allegiance, recognition, appreciation, exaltation, glory.

The act of honour here was to pour a perfumed oil on Jesus’ head. A very simple act. A very personal act. It was an intimate act, even though it was performed in the midst of a larger gathering. Honour, in this way, being given by this single person to Jesus. But the disciples didn’t see it that way. Just before this story in Matthew’s Gospel we read a teaching by Jesus on the kind of life we are to live as Christians, by giving food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, clothes to the naked, care for the sick, comfort to the imprisoned. Jesus brought these things together by saying, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (25.40). In other words, we honour Jesus as we express love to those in need. So in Matthew’s Gospel it is as if the disciples had just heard this teaching, and then this woman comes with expensive ointment, in this personal, intimate act of honour, and poured it on Jesus’ head. With this teaching of caring for the needy fresh in their minds, the disciples were critical of this woman. In Mark’s version of this story, they scolded the woman for what she did. In effect, the disciples were saying, “you honour our master by spending this money on helping the needy, not by wasting it on expensive perfume!”. But Jesus accepted the honour given him, and the form it was given to him. Jesus was once asked to sum up all of the Old Testament Law. The second summary was, “love your neighbour as yourself”. But the first summary was, “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your mind”. Love God completely. Love Christ totally. In correcting his disciples on this occasion, Jesus was reminding them that honouring him happens not only through what we do in his name. It also happens in the focus we give to Christ directly, in respect, allegiance, recognition, appreciation, exaltation, glory. Not just what we do in his name for the sake of others, but also in what we do for him directly.

Worship is about this. In worship we do nothing more than honour God, and Christ, and the Holy Spirit for who they are. Worship is a form of honour. Now for us, as humans, we don’t always come to worship with this sole focus. We come hoping for a good sermon... perhaps even occasionally for a great sermon. We come hoping to sing a favourite hymn. And I say “we” very deliberately, because clergy are the greatest offenders in this. We are professional worship leaders and preachers. I too easily can find myself getting sucked in to evaluating worship rather than participating in worship. “Oh! I wouldn’t choose that hymn... Oh! Why is this preacher talking about all this when the Bible passage is really about these other things...”. This is the easy trap clergy can fall into... any of us can fall into. Thinking that worship is for us. But worship is really an act of honour, like the woman anointing Jesus. It is about our taking time from our busy lives, to gather, to focus on him, to give praise to God. Even the sermon is an act of honouring God. For we show how we desire to honour God by learning more about God and discovering new ways to follow God’s Son more closely. Honour of God is also to be core to our prayer life. So in prayer we are encouraged to give God praise (to have a wonder-filled recognition of God for who God is). It is a moment to express gratitude for the lives we have and live. That’s honour. But

prayer, too, can easily become about us. Too easily prayer for ourselves and others can be about the agenda we have for God that we want God to comply with. But we act like this woman in Bethany giving honour to God when we include praise and gratitude to God in our prayers. When we give time in prayer to simply acknowledge that God is God, and God is our God. To praise Father, Son and Spirit in prayer is our outpouring of perfume.

Jesus interpreted this woman's action as "a good service" – an act of honour. But in this story we hear perhaps only part of what the honour was that she was conveying. This story, in Matthew's Gospel, comes just before the Last Supper, just before the crucifixion. Jesus interpreted this honour around his own expectation for his death, saying "You will not always have me. By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial". Jesus was a dead man walking, and she was honouring that death. And so do we, as in these days we look towards the cross of Good Friday. Lent is called a penitential season, when we can think of how we might give greater honour to Christ who gave all, for our sake, that we might have all in him. But there may have been something else behind this woman's act of honour, because she probably didn't know that Jesus expected to be buried in a couple of days. In their history and tradition, prophets were anointed... kings were anointed. In Matthew's narrative, Palm Sunday has already taken place, and the Jews had welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem as a coming king. And in the minds of some, perhaps even welcomed him as the long-expected Messiah. What does the word "Messiah" mean? It means "the anointed one of God". This is probably why this woman came to honour Jesus this way, to make her own profession of faith that she believed he was the new King of David's line, the Messiah come from God! And one such as this deserves all the honour, and worship, and service, and obedience one can give.

What was she willing to give to honour him? Jesus, at this moment, happened to be in Bethany, as was she. It was an incredible, unexpected opportunity for her – a moment not to be missed! She honoured Jesus in her life, and now life presented her with an opportunity to go – right now! – to perform a personal act to honour him. She honoured Jesus not just in the act of anointing, but also by making everything else in her life secondary to this priority – putting everything else on hold to give priority to honouring Jesus in what life presented her in that moment. The movie *Chariots of Fire* famously tells the story of the fastest man in the world, Eric Liddell, turned down the opportunity to prove just that at the 1924 Olympics because it would mean racing on a Sunday. Instead he ran in the 400 meter race which he was not favoured to win, but did. Just before that final heat, a American Olympic Team trainer slipped a piece of paper into his hand with a quotation from 1 Samuel 2:30: "Those who honour me I will honour." Winning Olympic gold was the second most important thing in the life of this 22 year old. Second to honouring God. Three years later he went to China as a missionary, where he died 20 years later in a Chinese internment camp. According to a fellow missionary, Liddell's last words were "It's complete surrender", in reference to how he had given his life to God. An act of honour.

How do we come to honour God more? It's really about a shift in attitude, and letting that new attitude shape our lives. It is about always seeking to inch away from "it's all about me" towards the perspective that "it is all about Christ". In other words, it's about having and knowing and acknowledging our own humility as we gaze upon the one who deserves all honour. How humble was this woman in Bethany? Well, we don't know her name. We know the host was Simon the Leper, but he's just part of the story's background. The story ends with Jesus' proclamation "truly I say to you, whenever this Gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her". Indeed we have remembered her this day. But not her name. I think this is because the story wishes to celebrate her act of humility and honour, and not remembering her name drives home the point. It's as if she was saying, "but it was not about me.. it was all about him". And, as that verse from 1 Samuel says, "those who honour me I will honour".

This was a woman who was not self-absorbed. At a time when people were clamouring to see Jesus the latest celebrity, to benefit from his healing touch, here was a woman who emptied her heart and her wallet for Jesus. Not to gain something, but to give something. As we look forward to the cross, may we find our own ways to honour him, which will be our own rich fragrance that we pour upon Christ, for his pleasure.