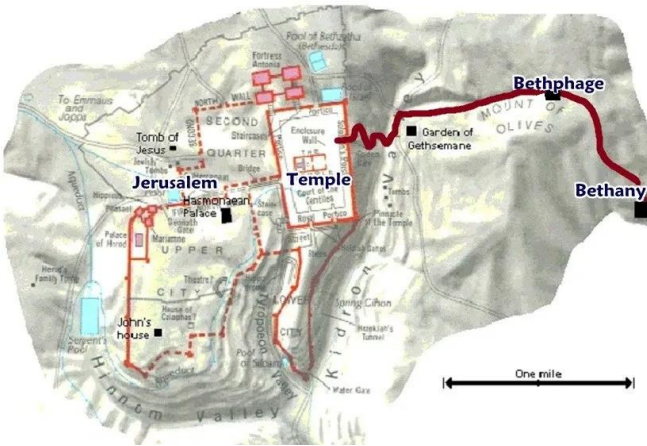


Readings: Isaiah 50:4-9a; Philippians 2:5-11; Mark 14:1-11.

Text: Mark 14:6 But Jesus said, "Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me".

Theme: *Some know only how to criticise and stay unhappy, while others just do it for God and are filled with satisfaction*

There are people who specialise in criticising others for what they do for God and their neighbours, and there are others who just do it, never paying attention to the sad noise that contaminates the air. You will also find that those who whine often portray themselves as honourable and righteous, while the doers are often the Tom, Dick, and Harry of the world. We can find both kinds of people, and more, in the reading from Mark.



Jesus and his disciples have arrived in Bethany, a village about 5 kms east of Jerusalem (see map). They usually stay with Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha, but in the story that is narrated from verse 3 to verse 9, they are visiting a certain Simon the leper, who also lives in Bethany.

While they are at Simon's house, an unnamed woman enters the house with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard. She breaks open the jar and pours the ointment on Jesus' head.

Her actions anger some of the men. So they whine: "Why was the ointment wasted in this way? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor," they continue, telling her off (vs 4-5).

But Jesus defends her: "[Leave] her alone," he says. "Why do you trouble her?" he continues. "She has performed a good service for me. You always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her," (vs 7-9).

The above story is bookended by the Jewish authority's plan to kill Jesus (vs 1&2) and Juda's offer to help them (vs 11 &12). Before we explore what, Mark is trying to tell his readers, it will be useful to know a little about the woman and Simon. Who is the un-named woman with the expensive perfume?

The usual rendering is that she is a woman with loose morals since she is 'out there' by herself, and she has the nerve to enter a men's gathering and does as we are being told. But we also know that wealthy women followed and supported Jesus and his ministry, as reported by Mark and

supported by research. Is it possible that Mark's woman was one of those wealthy, women followers, who would felt strong enough to ignore convention and 'misbehaved'?

According to New Testament scholar and Minister at Tuggeranong Uniting Church, Elizabeth Raine, 'Yes, wealthy women had more freedom to be 'disreputable' as their status allowed them to push the boundaries more,' (as per conversation). It is a view that is shared by Marg Mowczko (2014) who has shown that 'these [wealthy] women left the comfort of their homes, travelled rough, and disregarded cultural conventions in order to faithfully follow and serve their Lord'.

So yes; it is possible that Mark's woman could have been a wealthy person, if we consider the cost of the perfume, estimated to be worth a whole year's earning. But Raine has suggested to consider John's version of the same story, where the woman is Mary, the sister of Lazarus. Theologian James Edwards (2002) agrees. He also says that, Simon the leper was the father of Lazarus, Mary and Martha, based on a tradition that goes back to the 11th century Byzantine archbishop by the name of, Theophylact.

So why didn't Mark say the woman was Mary; why was Simon titled, a leper a; and was there any point in naming Bethany?

It turns out that everything is built around the ideas that Mark is trying to explore, concerning the relationships that Jesus had with those in his inner circle and those that are outside or not quite as close to him as the twelve disciples. Thus, by not naming the woman, she provides a point of contrast between those that are being stereotyped as sinful and the righteous disciples; Simon as a leper would mean he was an outsider; and Bethany is outside of Jerusalem.

The relationships between Jesus and his inner circle of men disciples and that with outsiders are brought out nicely by the structure of the passage. Scholars refer to Mark as, the 'sandwich maker', evangelist. He would start telling a story and before he finishes it, he would insert another story, before returning to finish the first story. This style provides points of comparison that illuminate both stories, as shown in today's reading, which is a plot to kill Jesus.

Mark begins by saying the authority is planning to kill Jesus. Mark then inserts the story of a woman who dared to ignore convention so she could anoint Jesus. Her devotion, her tenderness and her compassion stand in striking contrast to the evil pursuit of Judas and the authority.

Moreover, she shows a better grasp of Jesus' mission than the disciples, preparing Jesus' body for burial while the disciples sit and talk. Is this a case of familiarity breeding contempt, or is this what we call in Samoan, *o le latalata a alafau?* (the face is too close that the eyes cannot see it). Perhaps, all of that and more. But this happens if all we do is criticise others and get grumpy at the world, and not doing what we have promised to do for God and our neighbours.

Further, the woman's action shows the hypocrisy of the men. They pretend to care for the poor, when they really do not care. As Jesus tells them, the poor have always been with them, but they have done nothing.

The plan to kill Jesus reminds us about another sad reality that is so well known to us, that those that act violently against the vulnerable people, especially women and children, often turn out to be those whom

the victims know very well and would have trusted. In Samoan, this is a case of, *o si ota lima lava e pa'ia as lota mata* (I got poked in the eye by my own finger.) Judas was a disciple of Jesus. You could not be any closer to and be trusted by Jesus. Yet, Judas offered to assist the Jewish authority with their evil plan.

Now, while the theme of outsider-insider is evident, we should also be able to recognise a little bit of gender issue in the story. And we should not be surprised if Mark had this in mind, for women play very important roles in his gospel. What we see is the difference in the priority of the un-named woman compared to that of the men: she cares for Jesus, while the men think only about money.

Today is Palm and Passion Sunday. Jesus has arrived in Bethany and the journey to Jerusalem and the cross has begun. As followers of Jesus, we are all insiders. What is the most important thing to you this moment? Tomorrow? And in years to come? Are you a doer of things for God and your neighbours, or do you come to church just to meet your friends?

Jesus has made his decision. He is not giving up. He is going to face the political and religious authorities to remind them that God rules over everything, including life and death. It is a journey that, also, provides for our forgiveness.

How are you going to respond to such love, that he would lay down his life for you and me? Like the women who anointed Jesus, or like the men who complained about the economics and pretend they care?

Some know only how to criticise and stay unhappy, while others just do it for God and are filled with heavenly bliss. Choose wisely.

For the glory of God. Amen.