

A Sacrificial Death and a Sweet-Smelling Sacrifice

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[0 : 00] Well, believe it or not, as I said earlier, Easter is only four Sundays away. I've got no idea how that happened, but this time of year, it's an opportunity for us as a church to focus on the events in history that make us Christians. That is the death and the resurrection of Jesus. How often do we forget that if Jesus had not died, if he had not been raised from the dead, well, we wouldn't be here. Paul actually says in the pages of the Bible that if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile. That's Paul the Apostle. There would be no church.

We would have no hope in God. Our faith would be pointless and empty. And so it is worth, isn't it, setting time aside to reflect on and consider those events that happened at the end of Jesus' time on earth? Certainly, if you would call yourself a Christian, but even if you wouldn't call yourself a Christian or you wouldn't yet call yourself a Christian.

Now, it's been a while, I know, but I haven't had the chance really to say how wonderful it was to see so many of your friends here and so many neighbors around from this area at our Christmas carol service. It was just wonderful. So many came and heard the good news of Jesus coming into this world, some for the first time. But Christmas is only the start of the story, isn't it?

He was given the name Jesus because he was born to save his people from their sins, but to do so he would have to live and die and rise again. And so actually, the big finale to the Christmas story is Easter, the passion of the Christ. And in the same way that we wanted people to come and to hear and trust in the beginning of that story, well, we want people to come and hear even more the even better end of the story in Jesus' dying love and his being raised from the dead.

And so we're going to use these Sundays to prepare us for our worship and our witness at Easter time. And hopefully we've reached a point in John's gospel where John really helps us to do that.

[2 : 36] If you've been with us in the evenings, the last couple of months, we've carried on looking at John's gospel together. We've heard Jesus tell us time and again and show us time and again in his signs that he has come to die so that we might live. But in chapter 12, John slows right down.

Okay, so chapters 5 to 11, they cover several months of Jesus' life. At times it felt like going through a train station on a high-speed train, you know, the billboards and the people whip by really quickly and suddenly you're out the other side. But at this point, John slams the brakes on.

It feels like everything's happening in slow motion. Notice in chapter 12, verse 1, he says it's six days before the Passover. Well, we won't get to the Passover until chapter 20.

And there's only 21 chapters in the gospel. So almost the rest of the book takes place over one week. It's true what one scholar has said, that the gospels, the four gospels in the Bible, are not so much biographies of Jesus as they are passion narratives with long introductions.

And Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John spend chapters and chapters of their books on this last week of Jesus' life and specifically what ended that week, the cross and the empty tomb, which all tells us that it's good and right as a church that we slow down and that we shine a spotlight on the cross and on the empty tomb with the gospel writers. And John starts us off then on that theme with this wonderful scene of devotion and worship. How are we to respond to Jesus' death?

[4 : 36] Well, first in this passage, we see a contrast in worship, a contrast in worship. So in a way, this is a tale of two houses, both in a sense houses of worship. But to get to the significance of what Mary does in this house, we need to see what's happening a few miles down the road in Jerusalem in the temple. Okay, so read with me if you can from chapter 11, verse 55.

John tells us, when it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, many went up from the country to Jerusalem for their ceremonial cleansing before the Passover. They kept looking for Jesus. And as they stood in the temple courts, they asked one another, what do you think? Isn't he coming to the festival at all?

Okay, so Passover is coming. This is the high point in the calendar of the Jewish people. Well, God's people celebrated God's great rescue of them. And this was a rescue that defined who they were. So their ancestors a thousand years back had been slaves in Egypt. They lived in darkness and they were far from God at that time. But God came and saved his people out of slavery. And the final act of that rescue was the Passover. He told his people to kill a lamb, to put its blood on the doorposts of their door. And when God passed through the land to judge his enemies, he would see the blood and he would protect that family, that house, because of that blood. And so Passover for them back then was a bit like Easter for us now. Okay, they looked back on the death of a lamb for their rescue. We look back, don't we, on the death of a man for our rescue. And in fact, in this section, John wants us to see Jesus' death in terms of the Passover, the death, the blood of the lamb. And so thousands and thousands of people would stream to Jerusalem for Passover. John tells us they did ritual washing to get ready to purify themselves. They went to the temple to pray, to bring sacrifices, to worship God. And they did those things as acts of worship. But notice, I wonder if you noticed, when they get to the temple this year, what has changed? What are they looking for there in verse 56? They kept looking for Jesus.

They kept looking for Jesus. Friends, that's really telling, isn't it? You perhaps you're here this morning and you're looking for God. Let me suggest that who you are really looking for is Jesus. Okay, there is only one center of gravity in the spiritual world, one sun to our spiritual solar system, and it is Jesus. And however religious or God-fearing or God-loving we think we are, until we come to him, until we're pulled into his orbit, we are going to feel his absence.

[7 : 59] We're going to miss him. We're going to keep searching for him. These people, they went, didn't they, to worship God. As they washed themselves, they washed their hands, they're saying, where is Jesus? So they brought their sacrifice to the altar. They're thinking, is he coming?

Perhaps this is one of your first times at church. It is so important for you to know that you, if you want to worship God, you cannot do so without Jesus. And so keep looking for him. Keep looking for him. But there's a dark side to what's going on in that first house, the temple too, isn't there? Because the chief priests and the Pharisees have given orders that anyone who found where Jesus was should report it so that they might arrest him. So not everyone likes Jesus being at the center. They want him gone and gone for good. And so all this is happening in one house. Okay, they've come to worship God, but Jesus isn't there. They miss him. But some people would rather it stay that way.

But down the road in Bethany is another smaller house where Jesus is. We find him there in verse one of chapter 12. Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany where Lazarus lived, who he had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served while Lazarus reclined at the table with him. Now, if you weren't with us for chapter 11, it's well worth when you get home, reading through chapter 11, because there we find out why this meal was happening. This family was close to Jesus.

[9 : 55] And not so long ago, Jesus has raised their brother from the dead. And so they're having a meal in his honor. He is the center of gravity in this house. And we see, therefore, that he is the center of worship.

Because what happens next? What happens next in verse three? Everyone's eating, enjoying their meal. And then, Mary took about half a liter of pure nard and 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. Wow.

You know, they say the sense of smell is one of the most powerful senses when it comes to our memories. Perhaps you've had that. For me, it's the London Underground. When I go back to London and get on the tube, the smell comes and hits me. It's not a nice smell, but it takes me back to the time when I lived there and all the things that went on. So where would you smell your rich perfumes like this back then? Well, two places. Graveyards. Okay, perfumes like this we used to treat bodies before they were buried. And secondly, the temple where sweet-smelling, fragrant offerings were made to God. And now Jesus is going to pick up the first one in a moment, but just linger on that last idea with me, an offering, a sacrifice, worship. Because John wants us to understand what Mary has done as an act of worship.

There is worship trying to go on up the road in the one house, but they are stuck and lost without Jesus. But in the house where Jesus is, worship is going on big time.

This is an extraordinary offering. John calls it expensive perfume. That is the understatement of the century. Okay, the quantity and the quality of this stuff is outrageous.

[12:10] We're told it was about half a liter. Okay, if any of you had spritzed on half a liter of perfume, we would know about it from a mile away. Okay? And the quality, pure nard, you know, this is not watered down, cheap stuff. This is essential oils. And so how much does that cost?

Well, we're told there in verse five, a year's wages. Just think for a minute, if you saved up what you earned in a year, what could you buy? What could you get with your year's earnings? Okay, we're talking serious luxury items, aren't we? Things that cost tens of thousands of pounds. Now imagine Mary taking that bottle down from the shelf. Okay, the 20, 30, 40 grand bottle of perfume.

And she says, this perfume has one right use. She takes that bottle and pours it on the body of the Lord Jesus down to the last drop. A sweet smelling sacrifice to worship the Lord Jesus Christ. And then what does she do? She stands back and wait for Jesus to smile at her, praise her, thank her with a smug look on her face. No, look, she poured it on Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. You know, this was not enough. Not even the bottle of perfume could do it. Her whole being is wrapped up in this person to honor him, to worship him, this man who can give life from the dead, because he has shown us that he has come from the heart of God. Therefore, Mary knows he must be at the heart of her worship. So the guys up at the temple were only beginning to feel what Mary already knew, that to worship God, that to worship God, they needed Jesus. And when Jesus was there, he was enough.

[14:29] And she could give her all to him and worship him because of who he is. But notice too, the stark contrast, because there were people in God's house, the temple, who wanted Jesus dead.

What a difference in the house of Mary and Martha and Lazarus. Mary holds nothing back from Jesus, does she?

One writer calls this uninhibited devotion. No holds barred, she just has to be with him and give herself, body and soul, to him. And John wants us to know this morning that that is true worship. That is worship in spirit and in truth. Not simply coming to a special place at a special time for a special ritual, but coming to Jesus and giving ourselves body and soul to honoring and praising and worshipping him.

You know, that is our prayer. It was our prayer and is our prayers, isn't it, for Henry, even as he receives that special ritual of baptism, that as he grows up learning at home and at church how to follow Jesus, that Jesus would be far more to him than his baptism and far more to him than coming to church once a week, that he would be his personal and lifelong savior.

[15:53] And that is our prayer, surely, for all of us, isn't it? You're part of this church or around this church. You let me ask you, I wonder, in which of those houses would you have felt most at home that day?

Even if you're a Christian and you do love Jesus, can we not slip gradually into thinking that we have worshipped God because we have come to church on a Sunday and sung and prayed and gone home again?

You worship God tick, done for the week. You even think that coming here on a Sunday is a sacrifice and we hope that God appreciates what it's cost us to to come and to worship him. You know, this time on a Sunday is such an important part of our worship.

But brothers and sisters, Jesus wants the whole of us. He's worth our lives, isn't he? Not one day a week. He's worth a year's wages, not the pennies, our spare change.

Do our hearts not overflow in the light of his goodness and grace with thanks and love and adoration? Is he the center? Is he the center of this house, our church?

[17:12] Is he the center of our church? And your house, your family life, your life? Is he the center of our worship? Because John wants us to know that is true spiritual worship.

But next, John wants us to think about how that worship shows in our lives. How do we show that worship of Jesus? Well, secondly, he shows us a conflict at heart. A conflict at heart.

Now, perhaps when Mary poured that perfume over Jesus, you thought, what was she thinking?

Okay, surely in any reasonable world, she could have worshipped Jesus and kept that perfume for something else.

Okay, surely she could have used that for something better or sold it and used the money on something different. Well, if that was you, I'm afraid that you are not in good company.

Because we read in verse 4, one of Jesus' disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages.

[18:25] Now, that sounds, isn't it, very kind and compassionate. Maybe it sounds like prudent financial wisdom. But we are warned not to trust Judas' financial advice. Because John firstly reminds us that he is soon to sell Jesus himself for pennies to his enemies.

We're also told he can't be trusted with money anyway. He said this, verse 6, not because he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief. And as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

And so his sensible suggestion, you see, is actually a self-serving suggestion in disguise. He said he wanted to do something better with it. Actually, at heart, he wanted to keep it.

You think what I could do with a year's wages. But even if you're not a thief or a traitor, it is very possible, isn't it, that we look at Mary with suspicion.

Because she is not your typical free church. What do I mean by that? Well, look at the contrast between these two sisters. In Luke 10, we see these sisters again.

[19:41] Martha is busy serving, getting food ready. Mary is sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening to him. Just before this, in John chapter 11, their brother Lazarus had died. Martha goes and has a kind of back and forth with Jesus.

Whereas Mary won't even come to Jesus until her sister comes and drags her out of the house. Such is her grief. You have these sisters. If Martha is very head-driven, well, Mary is very heart-driven.

And I think of the two sisters, if we're honest, lots of us would find Martha the easier sister to spend time with. She's the one that we would love to be in our Bible studies.

She's the one that we would love to be on our rotas. What would we say, maybe, about Mary?

She's got a big heart. She's not very practical.

But what does Jesus say? What does Jesus say about Mary and what she did for him? Have a look there in verse 7.

[20:50] Jesus defends her. Leave her alone, Jesus replied. It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me.

Jesus says that she did the right thing with that priceless perfume. It was a good decision. That's what that perfume was intended for.

In Mark's account of this, Jesus says, She has done a beautiful thing for me. You know how comfortable, I wonder, would we have been with what Mary did?

Is there not a part of us that would be tempted to tell her off? Or if not out loud, to wonder in our hearts, is that really, really right? It's extravagant, isn't it?

It's over the top. But Jesus loves it because it is coming from a heart that is devoted to him. I wonder, would we have done the same in Mary's place?

[21:56] Well, I wonder, do we calculate and keep back from Jesus that we should rightfully give to him?

You know, perhaps it is, considering the cost of this gift, finance. Maybe this costly gift should send us back to weigh up our giving and saving and spending.

Because Jesus says, doesn't he, he has first claim on our pounds and pennies, on our gifts. But perhaps deeper than that, though, it's our emotional lives.

And seeing Mary's wholehearted devotion should send us back to pray to the Lord Jesus, to wear our hearts off of lesser loves, so that we might be more wholly devoted to him in our affections.

Or perhaps it's in this area of worship. And this morning, you know that you have not, in fact, yet given your heart to Jesus. You've not yet given your life and being to worshipping him.

[23:03] And that is what you need to consider. You know, Jesus, from his response to Mary, would clearly rather that our worship be marked by a shameless and self-giving and wholehearted devotion to him than any kind of reserved or calculating or cold decisions.

You know, it's far too common, isn't it? And it's easy. And I speak from experience for us to block off corners of our hearts or blanket off corners of our lives just for me.

And that's not to do with God. And I'm just going to look after this bit. But Jesus knows no such boundaries. He won't settle for a half or two-thirds of our lives.

He said it is right that we give him all of it. There are plenty of perfectly sensible but ultimately non-worshipful things that Mary could have done with that bottle.

Giving it to the poor, lining the pockets of the disciples. But Jesus wanted it used on him. And specifically in light of his death.

[24 : 21] Notice he picks that up in verse 7. Remember, this is the other time when rich perfumes would have been smelt and used to prepare a body to be buried.

You did Mary know that that's what she was doing? Probably not. But to Jesus, this smell is a flash forward to his death and burial.

Because he, unlike anyone else in the room, knew that his death was imminent, coming soon. And he knew, though no one else in the room did, that his death was not only to be a murder, but a sacrifice to save his people.

That he would be the lamb to take away the sins of the world. The Passover lamb to be slaughtered and his blood poured out for the protection and the forgiveness of Mary and us.

And so as Mary pours out the perfume on his body, she is preparing him for the sacrifice that he is going to make for her life and ours.

[25 : 32] And friends, if Mary didn't know that, and she still devoted herself to him so extravagantly, how much more should we devote ourselves to him, knowing what we know, knowing how this week will end?

With Jesus dying on the cross for our sins, turning aside God's holy anger against us, taking our punishment, our protection, and our rescue.

You're thinking about Jesus' death and burial this week. It brought to my mind the words of a hymn called Love Unknown. The writer reflects, What shall I say?

Heaven was his home, but mine the team in which he lay. Mine the tomb in which he lay. And the incredible thing is that we could each say that today.

That he came from heaven and took my place in the grave. That I rightly deserve, so that I might live with him in his home, in heaven forever.

[26 : 46] Does Jesus not deserve our wholehearted and lifelong worship and devotion for that death? That he died for me and ye. That one act of love should settle that conflict in our hearts, shouldn't it?

Tear down the boundaries. I call up our deepest devotion to him. Define who we are as his people. His sacrificial death calls for the sweet-smelling sacrifice of our lives.

And that's something that I'd love for us to consider as we approach Easter together. You know, Lent isn't really part of our tradition here.

Often it's used to kind of give up snacks or screen time or things like that. But maybe a more fruitful question to ask yourself in the coming weeks is, in what areas of my life do I need to devote myself more fully to Jesus?

Because he has loved me and given himself for me. It's quite a hard question to ask each other. But maybe it's something that you might feel comfortable sharing with someone, talking about it and maybe praying together about it.

[28 : 04] Because Bonacord, friends, in light of his sacrificial death, no part of our lives is too costly to give him. How will we respond to the death of Jesus?

Well, finally then, we're left with two conclusions. Two conclusions about Jesus. We saw earlier both the interest and the hostility to Jesus in the temple.

Well, now the Jewish leaders find they cannot stop people flooding to Jesus and believing in him. Understandably, they come not only, verse 9, to see Jesus, but also Lazarus, who he had raised from the dead.

And because of that evidence, they put their trust in him. It's an amazing thing, isn't it? Nowhere is that challenged or contested. You know, hang on, Lazarus is still dead?

Or wait, no, here's Lazarus' body? No, nobody can deny that Jesus has raised this man from the dead. In fact, even the chief priests have to resort to killing Lazarus again just to get rid of the evidence.

[29 : 10] Everyone knew this man had been dead four days and was now alive again because of Jesus. The only difference is that some people loved Jesus for that, and others hated him for that.

But nobody could deny that it had happened. And so the natural response of the people who went to see him was to believe in him. But others could not bear, could they, to let go of control, even for

a man who could give life from the dead.

The biggest twist of all is that we saw at the end of chapter 11 that it was actually giving Lazarus life that was to cost Jesus his life. And so it is with us.

To give us eternal life, he had to give his life to die in our place. And so John faces us with that question. In light of his life-giving death, how will we respond?

We might love him. We might hate him. The only thing that we cannot be is indifferent to him. Jesus does not give us that option. He says it is right for us to give him everything.

[30 : 25] And if he's not who he says he is, then that is an outright scandal. But if he is who he says he is, then that is only right. He's letting go of our control over our lives, coming to him with open hands to ask him to rule over us as our life-giving and loving king.

If you are still wrestling with that, if you do not yet know how to respond, I'd love to talk more with you about that. But if today you know what you need to know, and you know that Jesus deserves your whole being in response to his death, or will you not bow to him and worship him with open hands today?

Let's worship him together now as we pray. Let's pray together. Lord Jesus Christ, we worship you. Lord Jesus, we worship you. Lord Jesus, we worship you.

The one who gives life from the dead and the one who himself was raised from the dead. The one who lives and reigns and rules over all things.

[31 : 56] Lord Jesus, we worship you. And Lord, we pray that by your spirit, you would give us hearts that recognize your majesty and love. And in response, Lord, to all that you have done for us, that you would stir up in us the deepest love and the strongest affections.

Lord, help us, we pray. Shine a light into those dark corners that we would keep from your eyes. Lord, by your spirit, we pray, break down those barriers, tear up, Lord, those carpets under which we sweep our sins.

Lord, we would be ruled by you in our whole being, and we would hold nothing back from you. But you know, Lord, our hearts, and you know how we need for you to help us with that.

So do so, we pray. Lord, lead us to yourself day by day. Give us hearts that love you and long for you and lives that are devoted to you, body and soul.

We pray in your wonderful name. Amen.