

Imagine the accounts of you and your friend at a party where someone mysteriously dies. Compare the accounts a year later. There will almost certainly be differences.

The four gospels tell the story of a woman who anointed Jesus with a precious ointment. It is possible, but unlikely the incident happened more than once. The purpose of the gospel writers alters the setting, characters, timing and even what happens. We ignore the differences, to accept the incident happened. Mark and John set the story in Holy Week. During this Lent we are thinking about Jesus, the King in Holy Week. The incident teaches us how Jesus saw it and how we see Jesus for our faith.

According to Mark, on the Wednesday in our Lord's last week on earth, Jesus was resting at Bethany. An unidentified woman comes to Jesus and she breaks a jar of expensive ointment pouring it over his head. Various people are indignant. They say the ointment could have been sold and the money given to the poor.

Jesus rebukes them. He tells them, and us, there will always be the poor. We may explain that in different ways. A recent cartoon in *The Age* reminds us. A mother tells her child that low income families can't spend because it's good for the economy. That sort of comment could be made with governments of any persuasion. Our church Pantry is evidence of people's needs. The poor are always with us.

We call Jesus 'The King of Love.' The woman in Bethany extravagantly expressed her love. The perfume was meant to be used drop by drop, but the woman poured it all out. She did not think about the cost. The woman did a lovely deed. "A lovely deed is not only a thing of the moment; it leaves something in the world which time cannot take away" (W. Barclay - Crucified and Crowned p.29)

For practical reasons we may need to think about the cost of something when we wish to express our love for someone. The young man wants to buy a diamond ring with three stones, for his fiancée; he can only afford a ring with one diamond. The young man's love is no less, and the young woman is touched by the gift of his love.

'Opportunity knocks once' people say. The woman probably sensed this was a precious moment that would never come again. We all have many "goodbyes" in our lives. Leaving school, leaving home, seeing a special person in our life dying whether it be from illness or old age. We need to express our grief. The woman did that as she poured the ointment over Jesus whom she probably called, 'Rabbi'.

That is how Jesus saw it. He declared the woman had anointed him "in preparation for burial." (J B Phillips Mk 14:8) It was such a wonderful act of love, the story would be told throughout the world in memory of her. So it is.

The incident at Bethany was two days before the Crucifixion. Jesus knew "the only arms which would welcome him in Jerusalem were the arms of the cross." (W. Barclay Crucified and Crowned, p.30) There was no other way Jesus could express God's love for us

and reconcile us with him. We might see that personally as you and me. That is true. Remember Paul said, "God was in Christ reconciling the *world* to himself." (2 Cor. 5:19 John 3:16 as in the Gospel acclamation and gospel today)

The significance of the woman's act of love is realized more fully later. The women could not embalm Jesus the day he died. They returned to the tomb on the first day of the week to find it empty. Jesus had been raised from the dead.

The incident of the anointing of Jesus is also important for what it teaches about Jesus for our faith. In ancient Israel oil was used as a symbol of consecration to serve God as priests, prophets and kings. King Charles was anointed at his coronation. In some parts of the Church, priests are anointed.

Moses anointed Aaron to be a priest. Aaron was from the tribe of Levi. That tribe were always the priests. Their work was to teach the Law of God and fulfil religious duties in the temple. The priest presented people to God and God to people. The priests offered the sacrifices for sin so people would be reconciled to God.

The letter to the Hebrews teaches us Jesus is our great high priest. (Heb. 4:14. Chapters 7 & 10) He presents God to us and us to God. He is the priest who offered the once for all sacrifice which was Himself. As the splendid, and my favourite, Eucharist hymn puts it, "He on earth both priest and victim, in the Eucharistic feast." (Alleluia sing to Jesus TIS 517)

When Jesus was Transfigured, the prophet Elijah appeared with Jesus. Elijah was understood to represent the great Prophets. They preached repentance for sin, to live according to the way God intended, to consider the poor, and how God used Israel's relationship with other nations. We believe Jesus did the things that the prophets did. People declared, "A great prophet has come among us." (Lk. 7:16)

The prophets spoke of a future Messiah, the anointed of God. The people expected a Messiah like King David, who led armies into battle with great success. When Jesus fed five thousand, the crowd wanted to make him king, but he withdrew from them. Riding a donkey into Jerusalem was a symbol of a king, come in peace. When he was accused of being King of the Jews, he declared to the Roman Governor his kingship was not of this world. Yet like a king of old he confronted every battle including death and as a result brought new life. So that 'at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.' (Philippians 2:10f).

When we think of the incident of the anointing of Jesus in Holy Week, we of Jesus' love for someone who loves him. We may think his words about 'before his burial' are a prediction. So we may call them prophecy. Prophets are not only speaking of a future event. Jesus in true prophetic style called people to repent, to live as God intended. When we do repent of sin, we find he is the offering and priest makes the offering. For his obedience he is now exalted King of kings.