



There's more than one way to serve

John 12:1-8

The concept of service has a long history. Today, many prefer to talk about empowerment, rather than service. Part of the difficulty lies with the darker side of servanthood which has often been more akin to slavery. However, we cannot throw off the thought of service because.

- Jesus called disciples to be with him in serving others.
- Jesus modelled service in his life, spoke about it and demonstrated it.
- As we approach Easter, we see him washing the feet of the disciples.

So many of the parables of Jesus feature servants, but it would be unwise to have a narrow view of a servant. John Wesley's rule, which I introduced to Wesley Mission and appears almost everywhere, pitches service in a much broader context. Our understanding of servant will be tied to what we most value – or put another way, “We value what we freely serve”.

As we turn to John 12, we note its strategic position before Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, as the mood begins to intensify the focus on the Passion of our Lord.

- The scene is set in the home of Lazarus, Mary and Martha, close friends of Jesus. Where would be more appropriate to prepare for the final week?
- It occurs six days before Passover. There is a good deal of anticipation around and the tension was building.
- In keeping with a similar recollection in Luke's gospel, Martha does the serving and Mary does the listening.
- In John, we have the added dimension of Mary anointing Jesus' feet with pure nard. There could well be separate recollections of the same occurrence in the gospels.
- This passage is linked to Luke 7 where a sinful woman anoints at the home of Simon the Pharisee, but there is no requirement to read them together.
- In Luke 7, Pharisees looked on with disapproval. Here Judas expresses concern at the lavish show by Mary. We must guard against the temptation to blend the passages; each has a clear intention and purpose of its own.

John 12 is devoted to the developing sense of crisis as events lead to the cross. Hostility is increasing and is made all the more intensive because.

- The religious leaders had failed in their attempts to entangle Jesus in compromising dilemmas or defeat him in public debate. He did not comply with them in that regard.
- There had been, at least for John, a certain decline in his popularity as he refused to engage in a political coup and concentrated on depth of teaching, but a loyal group of



disciples and followers emerge. His popularity would diminish even further, prior to the cross.

- The forces against him are crystallizing. He has to hide away or to come out into the open. His entry into the city would mark a decisive declaration.

To begin to understand this passage and relate to it in a creative way, we need to see it in its context. As we have observed, the enemies of Jesus are beginning to turn up the heat, so much so that he could not walk about openly (11:54).

What are the reasons for such restriction on Jesus' openness?

- His ministry, especially his teaching and healing, was being closely observed.
- His mission was certainly making its impact.
- There was growing tension in the context of Passover.

Despite all this, Jesus shows up in Bethany six days before the Passover. Martha served supper and Mary seized her opportunity to perform her act of love.

Many people have concentrated on the extravagance of the act in relation to his death, which is soon to happen. Mary is willing to brave the inevitable social consequences of disapproval, even as she is observed by others.

It is impossible to know the extent to which Mary understood the significance of what she was doing but, whether the jar was treasured against a coming marriage or for ultimate funeral purposes, it was a costly thing to do. I prefer to think it was the evidence of grateful love.

- The Synoptic Gospels give the picture of her breaking an alabaster box, closely related to 'anointing', but in John there seems to be a different focus. As she wipes his feet with her hair, we see that Mary has a deep affection for Jesus.
- Part of our difficulty is that we tend to define the response of early followers (and ourselves) in too- formal and controlled a way. Here love is a decisive emotion; it still lies at the heart of discipleship.

In Luke's Gospel, she who weeps over Jesus' feet and wipes them with her hair is described as a sinner, and so understandably we separate the accounts. Mary was a respectable person, and we have no reason to presume otherwise, but nevertheless Jesus had given her quality of life, a rich and meaningful purpose. For all of us, there is the out-pouring of love which goes much further than duty alone ever will.

There is diversity in service

There is a simple but profound truth to be grasped in the contrast of service. Jesus enjoyed the warm hospitality of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Martha served him supper; an ordinary act of hospitality. Mary anointed his feet; an extraordinary act of love.

- Responding to human need with loving service is a mark of authentic discipleship in every age.



- Offering compassionate care should be a characteristic of all followers of Jesus Christ.
- An awareness of the different ways people can serve God is one of the challenges of the Church today.
- Service is alluded to in Matthew 25:34-46 and is a characteristic of a mission church. What we fail to do for others is closely aligned to the theme of Judgement. Jesus reminds us about prisoners, the hurt and those whose lives reveal suffering.

We must be willing to find new ways of serving God and not simply doing what we have always done. I was delighted in January to hear of a town centre church of a past ministry who were discovering new and imaginative ways of service. The constant discovery and re-discovery of what it means to serve him is our calling.

- My practical nature responds enthusiastically to tangible expression and Martha will always be remembered for that response. I have had some wonderful Marthas in my congregations.
- There is also part of me which affirms unreasonable and generous extravagance. Mary will always be remembered for her lavish response.

The real crux of the matter lies in genuinely giving oneself to God. Whether it is at table like Martha or in devotion like Mary, both are service. In the account of Sheep and Goats, to which I have just referred, there are many questions for us to address. Christ is to be found in the broken people of the world, in the marred face of humanity!

The irony in the passage is striking. Judas appears to speak for the poor, at least on the surface. Mary, by contrast, appears to engage in a frivolous, wasteful act. In reality, it is Mary who is the real prophet – she knows the significance of the moment and the right response!

Our inner-motives are often masked – v.6

This may well be typical of a comment made in retrospect, as the gospels are written in the Christian community, the other side of death and resurrection, but it does tell us how Judas was perceived. Judas is identified by what one commentator called ‘the shocking force of hindsight’. The other accounts refer to the indignation of the disciples, whilst John focuses on the one who he characterises as the ringleader of discontent.

- Judas criticised Mary for spilling costly ointment on the Lord’s feet. Try to imagine the inner-conflict for him!
- His argument was that it could have been sold for a great deal of money, which could have been given to the poor. After all, the value of the perfume would be equivalent to the total annual salary for an average to above-average worker. You might well have had sympathy for Judas’ position.
- He wanted to appear altruistic as a cloak for his greed. When it comes to money, we often hide our true motives and values, even from ourselves. One writer said, “Judas is the kind of person who has money on his mind all the while and sees everything from the aspect of pecuniary value.”



In coming to God, we see ourselves in Christ. The veil of pretence is removed and we are exposed for who we are. This is true not only about Judas, but all of us.

Mary and Judas stand in sharp contrast to each other: one concentrates only on the moment and so is full of concern about the cost; whilst the other sees the wider picture and the shadow of the cross is the definitive truth against which her action will make sense. Was Mary the only one who was sensitive to his impending death? What we can say is that it was on the mind of Jesus too and the two met in an action that opened up the thought for those who had eyes to see.

- When we meet Jesus Christ in the gospel, the real inner-motivation of our lives is exposed and opened up for what it is.
- When we listen to Jesus Christ in the gospel, our insignificant arguments are swept away by an all-pervading truth.
- First observations are not sufficient. Judas appears to have the honourable, wider picture as his 'case' but it is Martha and Mary who saw the bigger picture!

Judas has a miserly mind which is lamentable; he is his own worst enemy. His caustic criticism of Mary is summed up in one account, in the thought, "What a waste!" Life for him was measured in the market place, weighed on scales and compared, which is so far from the truth of the gospel.

I have a feeling, though one has to be careful in passing such judgement, that many church folk would have sided with Judas and may have said, 'We must be careful. Our generosity must be controlled' but that response can be wrong!

The aroma of Christian service can be picked up far beyond its immediate focus – v.3

The smell of the ointment was associated with the act of service, the act of love. In the experience of life, we do not give enough attention to the positive aspect of smells, and yet certain areas of the Christian Church do value such understanding.

- I am told when people are selling houses they ought to have home-cooked bread on the stove and coffee brewing, though I think I would worry if I found both of those things!
- Aromas of home are wonderful reminders. It may be the smell of a familiar meal which could remind us of early life. In group work, I have often shared with young people that smells are one of the earliest memories we have.
- Spices and aromatic ointments were costly, not least because they had to be imported from outside the country.

The aroma of this action will be picked up throughout all of Christianity, the Christian story and history of the Church. When we have engaged with Christian service, not as an advertisement of our own pretence of goodness, but as a genuine witness to God, the impact has been over and above what we could ever imagine.



- Look back on the story of any church and we are most alive when serving others. Two occasions in my ministry hold particularly positive memories: one is linked to a crisis in Poland in 1981, whilst in Plymouth; and then in 1989 in the North-East of England, helping to raise funds and medical resources to set up a centre for abused children in the Philippines.

- In the wider witness of the Christian community, we are known for what we do.

When we examine the ministry of Jesus, we see it focused in actions which demonstrate healing and forgiveness, and come to a climax as we approach Holy Week, in the foot-washing, the words from the cross and his death for us.

Mary's act of anointing Jesus' feet shows an act of love and beauty. For me, the power of the action lays not so much in what she did, but when she did it, as the events of the cross were drawing nearer. This may be the last moment for her to demonstrate her love and I am sure that as such it challenges us to seize the opportunities to show love, because we may not have the opportunity again.

The Jewish Talmud preserves a saying, "A good unguent spreads from the bedroom to the dining hall, and so does a good name from one end of the world to the other" which may help us to understand the missionary context of Mark 14:9.

As the bloodhounds are closing in on Jesus and the crowds gather for Passover, we begin to see the true colours of the characters around Jesus. Very often a crisis reveals just who we really are.

I am grateful to Bruce Milne, who makes the point that the public ministry began at a wedding feast in Cana and moves to a close with another social occasion, this time at Bethany.

- The mood, however, is strikingly different.
- At Cana, in anticipation of their newly-launched mission, we observe the sparkling wine of the kingdom compared to the tired, insipid water of Judaism.
- At Bethany, as the dark, heavy clouds of suffering are building, celebration is muted and conversation will be subdued.

Yet, as I see it, it is not an entirely negative mood. There are still things to celebrate. The very presence of Lazarus is a sign of new life and the cross will become the climax in the ministry of Jesus and the doorway to resurrection.

You cannot help but feel that John, who often uses contrast, is showing us a picture of Judas and Mary. One is filled with concern to retain and to keep; whilst the other's generosity moves her to spontaneous worship. Mary took the opportunity when it was given, as it may never return. She could have left the jar in place and, a week later, it would be too late, as his journey to the cross would have moved beyond the point where she could express her devotion and love.

As we stand on the edge of the holiest season of the Christian calendar, we want to offer him not the controlled and reasonable offering of our lives, but an extravagant heart, poured out to God. Mary showed unmeasured generosity. She did not consider whether



her gift was an acceptable minimum, for this was no ordinary gift; it was a treasure. This spontaneity of love was not smothered with caution and prudence. No wonder Jesus said, "Let her alone!" when she poured out her heart.

- He loved the open-hearted, generous liberality.
- The widow who cast everything in the temple treasury.
- Zacchaeus who restored four times as much as he ever embezzled.

Love's excesses are part of the secret of love itself. How gloomy the world would be without it! Consider a young man about to buy an engagement ring. His father, a hard-headed fellow, wants to give some practical advice. He sits down with his son and says, "Don't go buying a diamond ring. If you do, she will start to expect such extravagance. After all, it would be unfair to her – later on there really will be something that is needed like a washing machine or a vacuum cleaner, and you won't have the money. Buy one of the cheap alternatives." What does the young man do? He buys the ring!

By some standards, Mary would be considered foolish, but not to herself, nor was she to Jesus. It was typical of the kindness and love God offers us in Jesus Christ. Could he have chosen an easier way? His giving was complete and demonstrated in the total offering of the cross.

There are many ways to serve and Martha and Mary present us with two, but we unite in the knowledge that it is Jesus Christ we are serving.