

Monday 6<sup>th</sup> April – Matthew 26:6-16 – Jesus is anointed with perfume.

The setting for today's account is the Passover, the most important of the Jewish festivals, celebrating the nation being rescued from Egypt. As Jesus prepares for his suffering and death, the act of greatest love, so the religious leaders are plotting to kill him – humanity is seen here at its worst.

We are in the home of 'Simon the Leper', and although Matthew does not name the woman, John's Gospel tells us it was Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus (who are also present). Mary pours very costly perfume on Jesus, and the fragrance fills the room. Jesus tells us three things about her extraordinary action:

1. It is 'prophetic' – looking forward; she is preparing his body for burial by anointing it with perfume. This was part of the burial ritual at the time.
2. It is a beautiful act, showing costly devotion. The perfume is worth a year's wages – many thousands of pounds today.
3. Her action has everlasting value that will never be forgotten. It will be recognized and remembered across the world.

Maybe Mary is also showing her gratitude for Jesus raising her brother to life.

**Although others may see it as a waste, such acts of costly love offered to Jesus are never wasted. Let us show our love for the Lord Jesus in our worship, our giving, and in how we live our lives.**

Mary's sacrifice makes the disciples indignant, and John tells us it is Judas who says cynically that the perfume 'should have been sold, and the money given to the poor.'

Something in this incident sparks a dark response in Judas's soul. Immediately afterwards, Judas goes to the religious leaders and offers to betray Jesus for '30 pieces of silver'. People have given various reasons for his actions. Perhaps Jesus had not proved to be the Messiah he had hoped for; Judas may have been a 'Zealot', committed to armed rebellion against the Romans. We are told that Judas was a thief and used to take money from the disciples' 'common purse'. Luke says that Satan 'entered his soul', leading to his betrayal of the Lord.

**If we are honest, we can sometimes find in ourselves a critical spirit or greediness which affects how we live.**

**"Lord, please make our hearts ever more pure, and help us to be full of thankfulness for all that You have done for us."**

## Tuesday April 7th – Matthew 26:26-30 – the ‘Last Supper’

Our next scene takes place in the ‘Upper Room’. Arrangements have been made for the disciples to share the Passover meal, and Jesus has warned them that he is soon to be betrayed. This meal, just before Jesus was crucified, is known as the ‘Last Supper’.

Three themes from the Old Testament will help us understand the meaning of this meal.

1. Passover, the festival which celebrated the Jews’ release from slavery. At the first Passover a lamb was sacrificed in each home, and its blood placed on the doorposts and lintel to protect the family from judgment.
2. ‘Covenant’: there are several covenants in the Old Testament, each sealed by a sacrifice, but the prophet Jeremiah spoke of a *New Covenant* in which sins can be forgiven, and people can know God for themselves, with his law written on their hearts.
3. The ‘Day of Atonement’, a yearly ceremony where the blood of a lamb was sprinkled so that sins would be forgiven.

John the Baptist introduced Jesus as ‘the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world’, and Paul declares that Jesus is ‘our Passover Lamb’.

Jesus takes two of the usual parts of the Passover meal and gives them new meaning. Rather than focusing on deliverance from slavery, Jesus announces a much greater deliverance - from sin. He offers the bread to the disciples, saying that it is his body, to be broken for them. He then picks up the cup of wine and says that it is his blood, about to be poured out on the cross for many people, for the forgiveness of sin. His own blood will seal the ‘*New Covenant*’ between God and His people.

Jesus says that he will not drink wine again until he does so with them in God’s Kingdom. This points to an event in the future, and we share this meal of bread and wine until Jesus comes back; the Last Supper is the basis for our service of Communion. Just as the Jews relived their deliverance from slavery in the Passover meal, so we share in the death and rising of Jesus when we have Communion together.

**“Lord Jesus, as we think about You dying for us, we rejoice that your death offers us forgiveness from all we have ever done wrong. As Easter comes, we know that You rose again, and that one day You will come back and take us to be with You for ever.”**

## Wednesday April 8<sup>th</sup> – Matthew 26:31-35 – ‘Denying Jesus’

After the ‘Last Supper’, Jesus and his disciples walk to the Garden of Gethsemane. As they go, they sing a hymn – probably Psalms 113-118, celebrating their trust in God’s unfailing love. On the way, Jesus tells the disciples that they will all desert him, and he quotes from Zechariah, saying that when the Shepherd is attacked, the sheep will scatter. We notice that it is God who allows Jesus, the Shepherd, to be struck – it is part of His plan, as Peter will realise later. Jesus has already said that as the Good Shepherd he will lay his life down for the sheep. Jesus then gives his disciples hope – that they *will* see him again – in Galilee, where they first met him.

Peter says what the others are thinking – that he will stand firm even if everyone else deserts Jesus. However, Jesus tells Peter that, sadly, this promise will be broken in just a short time – before the cock crows in the early morning. This chapter ends with Peter’s bitter tears following his denial of Jesus. This is an event which we can all identify with – making promises to the Lord which we do not manage to keep.

There is a happy conclusion, recorded in John 21 – after Jesus has risen, he talks with Peter, and as Peter confirms his love for Jesus he is given the role of being a shepherd for Jesus’s sheep. Years later, Peter writes to other leaders in the young church, encouraging them too to be shepherds of the ‘flocks’ of Christians in their care.

**“Thank you Lord that even when we fail You, You graciously forgive and restore us.”**

## Thursday April 9<sup>th</sup> – Matthew 26:36-46 – in Gethsemane

A sense of ‘place’ is very important in these accounts. Gethsemane means ‘the olive press’. It was the place where olives were crushed beneath heavy stones so that oil could be extracted. This will be a place of crushing for Jesus. He describes himself as feeling ‘heavy, distressed, sorrowful’. Luke tells us that he sweated drops of blood – something that occasionally happens when people are under intense pressure.

Jesus refers to his ‘cup’, picking up the thread from the Last Supper. This is a cup of suffering which only He can drink. As we observe his suffering we remember that Jesus is fully human; in that humanity he wants to avoid the road ahead, with its physical and mental anguish. But He is also fully divine, and

He knows that this is the Father's will for him, so he prays, 'Not my will but Yours be done'.

There is a parallel with Jesus' prayer in John 12 – Jesus asks if he should say, 'Father, save me from this hour', but realises that it is for this very hour that he has come. So instead he prays, 'Father, glorify Your Name'.

In another contrast, after his anguish in prayer, Jesus finds the disciples asleep, unable to share with him in his pain even for one hour.

The story shows us:

- It is important to pray, especially at the most difficult times.
- It is important to persist – Jesus prays earnestly three times.
- God always answers prayer, but it may not always be the answer we would wish for.

Jesus knows that his 'hour' has finally come. This is a declaration of intent. It is the time when, through his suffering, death and rising again, he will be glorified. As the soldiers approach, Jesus is about to be betrayed by one of the disciples, and led off to face illegal trials, wrong accusations, insults, torture, flogging, and the anguish of being crucified, taking on Himself the sin of the world.

**“We thank You, Lord Jesus, for doing your Father's will, going to the Cross for us. Thank you for the forgiveness and new life we find when we trust in You.”**