

King

#6 in *IMAGES OF JESUS*

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Introduction

This morning we're thinking about the sixth image in our "Images of Jesus" series, namely, the image of king, and while we've been working in Luke, today we turn to John's Gospel. Jesus comes to the village of Bethany just a few days before his crucifixion.¹ In this little town a couple of miles outside of Jerusalem he was invited to dinner along with his disciples. Remember that Bethany was also the village of Jesus' friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, whom Jesus had just raised from the dead.²

At this dinner Mary anoints the feet of Jesus, using a perfume valued at almost a year's wages. It was made of pure nard, an oil obtained from the roots of the spikenard, a plant indigenous to India. Jewish tradition speaks of a good reputation as being like the fragrance of spikenard oil.³ So Mary poured it out upon Jesus' feet to honor his reputation, to honor who she understood him to be. But Jesus understood her gesture on a whole different level. It was a pointer to his death.

Now, anointing has a variety of roles in the Bible.⁴ Most importantly, anointing was used for the installation of Israel's kings.⁵ The Hebrew word *messiah* means "anointed one" and *christos* is the Greek word for *messiah*. So to say Jesus Christ means "Jesus the Anointed One, Jesus the King." Mary anointed Jesus as her king and today we'll grapple with what that means for us. Let's read it in John 12.

John 12.1-8 (NRSV)

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

ONE: Tension between life and death

Did Mary understand what she was doing when she anointed Jesus? Maybe. Maybe not. Her action was certainly open to interpretation. Judas saw it as wasteful. Mary probably saw it as an act of devotion: a

¹ Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John*, vol. 2, trans. Cecily Hastings, et al. (New York: Crossroad, 1990) 366. The anointing story appears in all four gospels (Mark 14.3-9, Matthew 26.6-13, and Luke 7.36-50) but is set in somewhat different contexts, especially in Luke.

² See John 11.1-44.

³ Schnackenburg, 366.

⁴ Anointing with oil was performed on special occasions such as weddings (Psalm 45.7) or at the reception of honored guests (Luke 7.46). It was also used in religious rituals such as the consecration of holy utensils (Exodus 40.10-15) and the ordination of priests (Exodus 28.41).

⁵ See 1 Samuel 10.1 and 2 Kings 9.6.

generous gesture of love for her king. At the very least, she probably thought it was doing something that Jesus needed at a deeply personal level. But whatever Mary or others thought, Jesus saw it as a gesture marking his death.

In fact, death is all around this story. This story is part of John's telling of the Passion and in John's Gospel the Passion of Jesus always means the cross. So John weaves into this brief account many forebodings of death. The story happened in Bethany where not long before Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. Close at hand then was an available tomb. Lazarus, to whom Jesus gave life, is himself at the table. Earlier in the gospel John says that raising Lazarus leads to Jesus being glorified and glory in John always means the cross. The time is Passover which in this Gospel is death time. Judas is a dark intruder who, in the time and place of this Gospel, was viewed as a betrayer and thief. Finally there is Mary's act, by Jesus' own words an anointing for his burial. Death is all around this story.⁶

But is not death always all around? Day after day in our families, in our places of work, in our neighborhoods and clubs, in our schools, and in our churches we experience death. We stop our cars to let the funeral procession pass. But we're in a funeral procession ourselves. We just don't know when we will ride in the hearse. So John keeps death always in front of us, not out of morbidity, but because the death of our Lord is our only hope for life. And only when we die to ourselves and to the things of this world can we live the life our Lord gives. So John holds us in the tension between life and death. If we do not die with Christ, we cannot live. Even Jesus had to go the way of death in order for there to be life.

This is the point of a story told by Anne Lamott, one of my favorite authors. Anne lives in Marin County, California. She is a good Presbyterian Christian who takes her faith and her church very seriously. In one of her writings she even says that she would not be alive were it not for the St. Andrews Presbyterian Church.

In a book she wrote about ten years ago, a book called *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, Anne tells about her best friend in the world, Pammy, a single mom like herself, who was dying of cancer. Anne found herself deeply depressed and angry and sad, so she sought out Pammy's doctor, who happened also to be a personal friend. Six months before Pammy died, the doctor said to Anne, "Watch her carefully right now, because she is teaching you how to live."

Lamott says that changed her life. She wrote: "I remind myself of this when I cannot get any work done: to live as if I'm dying, because the truth is we are all terminal on this bus. To live as if we are dying gives us a chance to experience some real presence. Time is so full for people who are dying in a conscious way, full in a way life is for children. They spend big round hours. So, instead of staring miserably at the computer screen trying to will my way into having a breakthrough, I say to myself, "Okay, hmmm, let's see. Dying tomorrow. What should I do today?"⁷

That story fits John's Gospel. Mary anointed Jesus as her king but Jesus pointed out that her costly devotion was a marker of his death. For Jesus is the king who dies and by his dying brings life.

TWO: What kind of king?

Whatever Mary meant by anointing Jesus, her action showed her deep faith in him. She saw him as king, even if others didn't. She recognized the dignity and greatness of Jesus and with costly adoration

⁶ Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, and Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching the New Common Lectionary, Year B Lent, Holy Week, Easter* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984) 96.

⁷ Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1994) 179.

witnessed to the others about whom they had in their midst. But she also ministered to Jesus in his need. Just a few days before his death, Jesus needed a friend and Mary was there for him.

We should not underestimate how hard this was for her. The story is really quite scandalous. Pouring out all that expensive perfume was extravagant enough. But for a woman to let down her hair in mixed company to dry a man's feet was utterly shocking. What Mary did must have caused a long, embarrassed silence. Finally Judas blurted out what everyone was thinking. Maybe he cared about the money or the poor, maybe he didn't. But he broke the silence, I think, mostly because he was shocked at what was taking place.⁸

What took place was an intimate connection between Jesus the king and a devoted follower. And that intimacy shows the kind of relationship Jesus wants with all of us. For, yes, he is king but not a king who cares for the trappings and power of royalty. He is the king who dies and the king who seeks the intimate devotion of his people, a devotion that will lead people to care for others in need as Mary cared for him in his need.

Given that Jesus is this kind of king, where might we find him today? My mind took a strange twist at this point and I asked myself this question as if some aliens landed and wanted to know where to find this king Jesus. What would I tell them? Maybe this came to mind because Mars has been in the news a lot recently with NASA's Mars rovers, Spirit and Opportunity, putting around the Red Planet for the last couple of months. Remember the old jokes and cartoons about the Martians landing and saying "take me to your leader?" Well, what if the Martians landed outside in the parking lot this morning, heard me talking about Jesus as king, and marched inside and asked, "Where is this king? Take us to your leader." Where would we take them?

- How about stopping at the richest folks in this congregation? I don't know who that is but maybe the Martians would know. Might the king be there?
- What about taking their spaceship to zip across the country to Medina, Washington and visit in the home of Bill Gates? He's not only the richest man in America but he's the technology leader. Do you think the king would be hanging out there?
- Maybe we should zip back to Washington, D.C., and show our alien friends the Congress and the Supreme Court and the White House. Is that where the king is?
- What about visiting Hollywood or New York with the lords and ladies of the entertainment industry? What about seeing some sports heroes or heroines? Do you think the king would be there?
- What about visiting Donald Trump? He's on television a lot these days. Maybe he and his buddy business barons would know the whereabouts of the king.
- What about the United Nations? Or the capitals of Europe, Asia, Africa, South America, or even the Middle East?
- Do we visit Harvard and MIT or other great universities and centers of science?
- What about the grand cathedrals or the megachurches blasting out their message on Christian television?

The truth is, in light of today's text, I'm not sure that Jesus the king would be in any of those places.

⁸ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1983) 256.

But take the Martians down to the Framingham Salvation Army where hungry people are fed.⁹ Take them anywhere where people are hurting and where others, with costly devotion, are ministering to that hurt, and there you will likely find the king. For Jesus is the king who dies to bring us life at our greatest point of need. And Jesus is the king who hopes our costly devotion to him will also serve others who are in need.

Conclusion

A friend of mine emailed to me a cute story that perhaps in a whimsical way tells about meeting others who are in need. There was this little boy who wanted to meet God.¹⁰ He knew it was a long trip to where God lived, so he packed his suitcase with a bag of potato chips and a six-pack of root beer and started his journey.

When he had gone about three blocks, he met an old woman. She was sitting in the park, just staring at some pigeons. The boy sat down next to her and opened his suitcase. He was about to take a drink from his root beer when he noticed that the old lady looked hungry, so he offered her some chips. She gratefully accepted and smiled at him.

Her smile was so pretty that the boy wanted to see it again, so he offered her a root beer. Again, she smiled at him. The boy was delighted! They sat there all afternoon eating and smiling, but they never said a word.

As twilight approached, the boy realized how tired he was and he got up to leave; but before he had gone more than a few steps, he turned around, ran back to the old woman, and gave her a hug. She gave him her biggest smile ever.

When the boy opened the door to his own house a short time later, his mother was surprised by the look of joy on his face. She asked him, “What did you do today that made you so happy?”

He replied, “I had lunch with God.” But before his mother could respond, he added, “You know what? She’s got the most beautiful smile I’ve ever seen!”

Meanwhile, the old woman, also radiant with joy, returned to her home where her son also lived. He was stunned by the look of peace on her face and he asked, “Mother, what did you do today that made you so happy?”

She replied, “I ate potato chips in the park with God.” However, before her son responded, she added, “You know, he’s much younger than I expected.”

Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around. People come

⁹ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew, Volume II, The Churchbook, Matthew 13-28* (Dallas: Word Books, 1990) 927-928. Commenting on the Matthew 25 passage where the king asks if the righteous have acted lovingly unto the least, Bruner writes. “The high Lord is found in the low human. The prophets and psalms are full of this truth. The law of God constantly directs Israel to widow and orphan, Israel’s most conspicuous needy and powerless. Jesus’ Beatitude ethic, his radically theocentric humanism, and particularly his theology of the cross (16:21-28), reverse what most religion teaches as high and low, divine and human. Pharisaic leadership’s greatnessism (chapter 23) blinded her to God’s poorism and to Jesus’ littleism.

“Luther . . . : ‘O dear Lord God! How are we so blind that we don’t take such love to heart! Who could have thought it up that God himself throws himself so deep down into our midst and accepts the works of all those who give themselves to the poor as though they were done for him. Thus the world is full, full of God — in every alley, before your door, you find Christ.’”

¹⁰ This story was sent to me in an email from a friend on March 25, 2004. There was no identification of the source of the story.

into our lives for a reason, a season, or a lifetime. Our King would have us embrace all equally.

The story ends by saying, “Have lunch with God ... bring chips.” Mary brought oil. But chips will do, or anything else for that matter, anything that lets our love for the King express our love for people in need.