

Matthew 26. 1-16. Georgia. Gospel. 6 November 2011.

Our reading for this morning comes from Matthew's Gospel, chapter 26, from verse 1 down to verse 16.

[Read Matthew 26. 1-16]

This morning I should like to consider with you two features of our passage which on the face of it are rather curious – the one is fairly obvious and the other less so.

The first feature – the more obvious of the two – concerns our Lord's betrayal by Judas.¹ We learn from our Lord Himself in verses 1 and 2 of the – to Him – known certainty of it, and we learn in verses 3 to 5 something of the background to it – and on the human level the need for it.

Then we are given details of the done deal in verses 14 to 16, where we are first reminded who Judas was ('one of the twelve, named Judas Iscariot'), and then we are told plainly *to whom* he went ('the chief priests', who we had met in verse 3), *when* he went ('then'), and *for what* he went (to deliver Jesus to them in exchange for money). And not only so, but we are informed of the precise sum which he received from the chief priests ('thirty pieces of silver') and of the way in which he immediately set about keeping his part of the bargain (by seeking opportunity to betray Jesus).

And yet, although we are told *all* these things, we are offered no hint either as to *why* Judas stooped so low as to do this – apart, of course, from the simple fact that he made a relatively paltry sum of money out of it – or *why* he chose to do it *now*.

The second, less obvious, curious feature of our passage concerns its decidedly odd structure.

And why, you may wonder, do I describe this as 'odd'? Well, as you may have noticed, there are three main sections to our passage. The first section comprises verses 1-5, which covers both (a) the prediction which Jesus made of His betrayal, occupying verses 1-2, and (b) the problem which faced the council, occupying verses 3-5 – which problem suggests to us, of course, the need for the betrayal. The second section comprises verses 6-13, where we read of the anointing of our Lord – by Mary from Bethany, whose name we learn from the parallel account in John 12. And then, finally, in verses 14 to 16, we have the account of the dark deed of betrayal itself.

And you can already see that, on the face of it, verses 6-13 do not really seem to fit here at all well – breaking up as they do the two sections which focus on our Lord's betrayal. And *then* comes the bombshell. Because we know that chronologically they *don't* fit here! And we know this because John has dated the incident of the anointing *very* precisely. According to John 12 verse 1, the anointing took place *six* days before the Passover. But, in common with verse 1 of Mark 14, verse 1 of our chapter dates the events of verses 1-5 to *two* days before the Passover.²

Let the implications of that sink in. 'Six days before the Passover' means that this incident – recorded in verses 6-13 – took place, *not following* the incident at the beginning of chapter 26, but *before* the incident at the beginning of chapter 21! Yes, the anointing took place *before* the Triumphal Entry on Palm Sunday and the subsequent cleansing of the temple at the beginning of chapter 21, *before* the controversies with the Jews about tribute money, resurrection and the greatest commandment in chapter 22, *before* His scathing denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees in chapter 23, and *before* the prophetic discourses given on the Mount of Olives in chapters 24 and 25. Wow!

Then why, we ask, does Matthew (and Mark, for that matter) displace the account of the anointing and record it so much later – here, in chapter 26? And what has this to do with Judas' reason – or reasons – for betraying the Lord Jesus?

But before I attempt to answer these questions let us hang around for a few moments at verses 1-5.³

This was our Lord's fourth major prediction of His suffering and death. Although it is *not* the first time that He has spoken plainly of the mode of His death (namely death by crucifixion),⁴ it is the first time that He has mentioned its timing, namely at the Passover feast now only two days away.⁵

A short time before, as recorded in the closing section of the previous chapter, the Saviour had spoken of the time when 'the Son of man shall come in His glory'⁶. Mark then the contrast now, when He told His disciples, 'the Son of man is⁷ delivered up (is 'betrayed') to be crucified'.⁸

And it is clear from His earlier predictions that my Lord felt very keenly the fact that He was to be 'betrayed' (an ugly word at the best of times) by one of His own disciples.⁹ The apostle John tells us that a short time after, Jesus 'was

troubled in spirit, and testified and said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me".¹⁰ Oh yes, He felt that deeply.

And the same day that Jesus made His announcement to His disciples concerning His approaching death, the chief priests and elders met together unofficially to plot that very thing. But *their* views about the timing, and, quite likely, the mode of His death, were very different to *His*. For to make a move against Jesus 'during the feast' was, in their eyes, not an option. And no one saw that more clearly than the man in whose palace court they gathered – namely, 'the High Priest, named Caiaphas' – the man of whom Josephus spoke more fully as 'Joseph, who is also Caiaphas'.¹¹

Throughout Old Testament days, the office of high priest had, as God intended, been both hereditary and for life. But, as we noted last week, under the Romans, high priests came and went in rapid succession as the Romans appointed and deposed them to suit their own purposes. And in the hundred or so years between 37 BC and 67 AD (when the last high priest was appointed prior to the destruction of the temple) there were no fewer than 28 high priests.

And yet Joseph Caiaphas, having been appointed by Pilate's predecessor (Valerius Gratus) in 18 AD, had already managed to hold on to the office for well over 12 years – and would indeed continue to do so until his death some six years later.¹²

This was an amazingly long time for a high priest to last under the Romans. It shows that Caiaphas had mastered the art of co-operating with the ruling power to a fine art. Clearly he was highly skilled at diplomacy and maintaining good working relations with them.

Some time before, following the raising of Lazarus, the chief priests and the Pharisees had put it to the Sanhedrin that, if they left Jesus alone, 'the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation', to which Caiaphas had responded with the prophetic words, 'it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish'. 'From that day on' the Council had schemed to put Jesus to death. But they had been foiled because at that point our Lord had left Jerusalem and had spent some time in a country town called Ephraim.¹³

But, as the Jewish authorities knew only too well, Jesus was now back in Jerusalem! Yet from his many dealings with the Roman authorities, Caiaphas was well aware that the one thing which the Romans would not tolerate was civil disorder, and that if there was any riot or disturbance, he – along with the other members of the council, of course – was in very real danger of losing his prized position and power.

And, certainly, at Passover time, the atmosphere in Jerusalem was tense; indeed, it was highly explosive. The city was packed with people. According to Josephus, a census conducted several years later suggested that at Passover time there were around 2¾ million people crammed into the city – that is almost the total population of my home land of Wales!¹⁴ Whether there were actually that many folk or not, there were certainly a lot!¹⁵

And to the notoriously volatile pilgrims from Galilee, Jesus was, at the least, a prophet. And so Caiaphas and his colleagues knew it was essential that the Lord be captured secretly and quietly. And so Caiaphas, who had earlier determined that Jesus should die lest the Romans step in and remove him and his colleagues, now determined that our Lord's death would have to be postponed until after the eight days of the Feast of Passover and Unleavened Bread for the same reason. Let me say that again ... Caiaphas, the man who had earlier determined that Jesus should die lest the Romans step in and remove him and his colleagues, now determined that our Lord's death would have to be postponed until after the eight days of the Feast of Passover and Unleavened Bread for the same reason. But then he didn't know of our Lord's specific prediction in verse 2!

He didn't know that God's predetermined time for 'Christ our Passover' to be slain was in 'two days' time, during the Passover. And we know that the timing of the Saviour's death could no more be delayed than it could be hastened and advanced. Previously men had planned to kill our Lord too early – when 'His time had not yet come'.¹⁶ Now they planned to do it too late. But, for all that, God was still on the throne!

And little did Satan know when he twice entered into Judas¹⁷ and put it into his heart to betray Jesus, that he was not only fulfilling God's purpose of providing full salvation for men, but that he was ensuring that it went ahead right on schedule.

I suggest that, prompted by the Holy Spirit, Matthew and Mark inserted the account of our Lord's anointing where they did because what took place at the anointing goes no small way to explain why Judas decided to betray our Lord.

As I see it, first of all what happened at Bethany brought to a head Judas's increasing sense of disillusionment and disappointment with Jesus. For not only, as we have noted, has Jesus now spoken yet again about His forthcoming death ... not only has He spelled out for the second time the manner of His death – namely by crucifixion ... not

only has He now made it clear that His death was only a matter of days away, but the certainty of His impending death was heavily underlined by His explicit reference to His 'burial'.

And what an outstanding example of sacrifice and devotion – and of extravagant love – Mary's action has left us.¹⁸ Make no mistake, it was no small gift which Mary lavished upon our Lord. It was, the gospels tell us, a pound weight¹⁹ of 'very expensive ointment' which she poured upon both His head²⁰ and His feet.²¹ And the mention of both His head and His feet remind me of the poetic description given by the Shulammitte of her beloved in the Song of Songs chapter 5, where she speaks of both his head and his feet as being 'fine gold'.²² Clearly the head and feet of Mary's Saviour were no less precious to Mary!²³

It was 'very expensive ointment', says Matthew. 'ointment of pure nard', says Mark – of genuine, unadulterated nard, that is, not mixed with any other aromatic substances, as were less expensive kinds. This was the very best nard.

And I note that Matthew uses the exact words to describe what Mary expended on Jesus as one Greek historian had used to describe a gift presented some 550 years before by Cambyses (the King of Persia and son of Cyrus the Great) to the King of the Ethiopians.²⁴ It is often said, with good reason, that Matthew's gospel is the gospel of the King. Well, on the basis of Herodotus' statement, we can say that it wasn't only the treasure brought by the wise men from the east *following* our Lord's *birth*, but the ointment poured out on our Lord by Mary *prior to His death*, which was 'a gift fit for a king'!

But it is important for us to note the storm of criticism which broke on Mary following her loving and worshipful action.

Matthew records in general terms of how 'the disciples' spoke out.²⁵ Mark, more specifically, tells us that 'there were some' who spoke with anger and indignation both about her and to her.²⁶ John (who, we recall, was present at the time), with even greater precision, identifies the man who first voiced the objection. It was, John says, 'Judas Iscariot'.²⁷ It was Judas, the apostles' treasurer, who very quickly calculated the value of what Mary bestowed on Jesus. And its commercial value, Judas estimated, was no less than three hundred denarii – , more or less a whole year's wage for a working man,²⁸ and sufficient to treat a crowd of 5,000 men, together with their families, to a satisfying meal.²⁹

This was certainly a case of 'love's extravagance'. For if the heart of Judas was filled, as it was, with the love of money, Mary's heart was filled with love for her Master.³⁰

'Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?' Judas asked – a question soon taken up by many others.³¹ And in many ways the mention of the poor was natural, because in His law God Himself had taught that 'the poor will never cease out of the land; therefore I command you, you shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor'.³²

Indeed, the Lord appears to have been alluding to that very verse in His response to the criticisms aimed at Mary: 'Why do you trouble the woman? For she has wrought a good work upon me. For *you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me*'.³³ Not that the Saviour was at all criticising the disciples for their concern for the poor. As we know, from both His miracles and His teaching, no one was more concerned for the poor than He.³⁴

And I note that the same woman who had once 'chosen the good part' at our Lord's feet,³⁵ now 'wrought a good work' at His feet. And some translations render the expression 'wrought a good work upon me' as 'done a beautiful thing to me'. What Judas and the others therefore called 'waste', the Saviour Himself called 'a beautiful thing'.

But in that it had been Judas who had first voiced his disapproval of Mary's action, it had been Judas who bore the main brunt of our Lord's rebuke when He (the Lord) sprang to Mary's defence.

And by placing the account of the anointing here, I think the gospel writers are suggesting that four days later the Lord's reproof, which must have put Judas's nose very much out of joint, still rankled in his mind and heart.³⁶

But there was, of course, more to Judas' betrayal than that. For according to all three gospel accounts of the anointing, our Lord had spoken very plainly of His 'burial'.

And I understand Him to be saying that Mary, who had, on one occasion, as we just noted, sat long as a willing listener at His feet, had grasped what the disciples were slow to accept ... that He was going to die ... and, indeed, that if His death was to be by crucifixion, as He said, there would be no opportunity following His death to anoint His body in any decent or thorough way.³⁷

And I note that Mary did not go with the other women to the tomb on the first day of the week to anoint His body – for she had already done it. And well she had, for, when another Mary – Mary Magdalene – came to anoint His body, she was too late – for the Lord had already risen and needed no anointing. And I note that, when that Mary

looked down into the tomb, she saw two angels 'sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and the other at the feet' – sitting by those parts of our Lord's body which well over a week before Mary of Bethany had anointed for His burial.³⁸

But the point for Judas was simple. Frankly, a conquering Messiah poised to trounce the Romans and establish a glorious kingdom – which, in all likelihood, Judas, as the other disciples, had expected – such a Messiah would not have spoken of his forthcoming burial. And when our Lord so spoke, any hopes and dreams of earthly splendour which Judas had once entertained were well and truly crushed.³⁹

There would then shortly be no glorious kingdom, and he, the apostles' treasurer, would not therefore be the Secretary of the Treasury after all! As Judas saw it, all that was left for him now was to salvage what profit he could for himself.

But the anointing at Bethany not only rebuked Judas' criticism and finally dashed any hopes he had of earthly glory. His reaction to Mary's extravagance prompted John to expose Judas' real reason for wanting the ointment to be sold ... unmasking him as the hypocrite and thief he was – ready to steal even from the needy folk for whom he professed such concern. For though Judas acted the part of a disciple of Christ, he was in reality a servant of mammon⁴⁰ ready to sell his master for the compensation price a man in Israel would once have paid to his neighbour if his own ox had gored his neighbour's slave to death.⁴¹

Drawing these three strands together, I think we can say that the treachery of Judas⁴² was prompted by a combination of (i) disillusionment and disappointment at our Lord's reference to His imminent burial, (ii) resentment at our Lord's rebuke, and (iii) his love of money.

And it is for this reason, I suggest, that both Matthew and Mark record *here* an incident which had taken place some four days before.⁴³

And these two incidents – His anointing by Mary and His betrayal by Judas – confront us with two very different valuations placed on Jesus.⁴⁴ All of which raises the question we must each answer today, 'How much does He (the Lord Jesus) mean to me?⁴⁵

Footnotes

¹ Judas is one of only two mere men mentioned in the Gospels whose works are foretold in the Old Testament. (Compare the Beast of Revelation 13.) John the Baptist is the other, Matt. 11. 10. For Judas see John 12. 18; Acts 1. 16. (The man of the heel, John 13. 18, heart, John 13. 2, and Judas kissed the Door of Heaven, and passed through the door of hell.) the one announced His coming and the other contrived His departure.

² On Jewish reckoning, on Wednesday if Passover was on Thursday evening; cf. the three days before the resurrection.

³ The expression, 'when Jesus had finished all these sayings' in verse 1 provides the last of the five major divisions in Matthews gospel.³ As with the earlier four similar expressions,³ it comes at the close of a major address by our Lord, in this case introducing the final and longest continuous narrative section – that which covers our Lord's passion and resurrection, which we will studying over the coming weeks, and which reaches its climax with another of our Lord's addresses – on that occasion a very brief but important one, Matt. 28. 18-20.

⁴ Compare Matt. 20. 19.

⁵ He informs the disciples, not only that He was to be killed, and how He was to be killed, but when He was to be killed.

⁶ Matt. 25. 31.

⁷ The present tense, 'is betrayed', denotes the imminence and certainty of the event. Our Lord sees the event as actually and already present.

⁸ Matt. 26. 2.

⁹ Matt. 17. 22; 20. 18.

¹⁰ John 13. 21.

¹¹ ('Ant.', xviii. 2. 2)

¹² His father-in-law Annas (6-15) had been appointed by Quirinius, but after nine years had been deposed; he was succeeded in turn by Ishmael (15-16), Eleazar son of Annas (16-17), Simon (17-18), and fourthly by Caiaphas (18-36), those since Annas being appointed by the procurator Valerius Gratus (15-26), the procurator of Judea before Pontius Pilate.¹² The Old Testament regarded the high priest as high priest until his death. Consequently the Jews still viewed Annas as the high priest. This probably explains why Matthew and John spoke of Caiaphas as the high priest (John 11.49), but Luke said Annas was the high priest (Luke 3. 2; Acts 4. 6).

¹³ More recently, the Council had issued 'a command that if anyone knew where He was, he should report it, that they might seize Him'.

¹⁴ See Josephus Wars of the Jews, 6. 9. 3. The then governor Cestius felt that Nero didn't understand the problems which faced him given the number of the Jews. So he asked the High Priest to take a note of the lambs slain. Josephus says that 'a company of not less than 10 men must belong to every lamb and many of us are twenty in a company'. On that occasion the number of lambs slain was 256,500. Josephus estimated that during that Passover there must have been around 2¾ million people.

¹⁵ See John 11. 55; cf. 12. 12.

¹⁶ John 7. 30; 8. 20.

¹⁷ Luke 22. 3; John 13. 26-27.

¹⁸ Matthew is called "the publican" after he had relinquished his obnoxious business (Matt. 10. 3) man is termed "the dead" (Luke vii. 15). The frequency of the name Simon among the Jews rendered the addition of a surname expedient ; thus we have Simon the Canaanite, Simon the tanner, Simon Bar-jona, etc. John does not say that it took place in the home of Lazarus etc – only that the members were present.

¹⁹ John 12. 3.

²⁰ Matt. 26. 6.

²¹ John 12. 3.

²² Song of Songs 5. 11, 15.

²³ In the latter case, according to John 12, wiping them – His feet – not with a towel, as He would the feet of His disciples in John 13, but with her hair – spoken of by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 11. 15 as the woman's glory. What a thought! Her glory at His feet!

²⁴ 'Then as soon as the Ichthyophagoi ('Fisheaters' – who spoke the language of Ethiopia - Nubian) came to Cambyses from Elephantine, he sent them to the Ethiopians, enjoining them what they should say and giving them gifts to bear with them, that is to say a purple garment, and a collar of twisted gold with bracelets, and an alabaster flask of very expensive ointment (the exact words used in Matthew 26. 7), and a cask of palm-wine'. Herodotus Histories. Book III, paragraph 20. [<http://www.bostonleadershipbuilders.com/herodotus/book03.htm> ... [http://www.scribd.com/doc/31102425/Tales-from-Herodotus-The-Ethiopians.](http://www.scribd.com/doc/31102425/Tales-from-Herodotus-The-Ethiopians)]

The messengers presented their gifts to their king and the message that Cambyses wished to become his friend and had sent the gifts 'which are such as give him great pleasure'. It was a gift fit for a king (Matthew's gospel!) The messengers were taken to be spies by the Ethiopian king and were sent back with a huge bow and the challenge that, when Cambyses could draw it, he would be fit to encounter the Ethiopians. Cambyses, son of Cyrus, sent the men to spy on the Ethiopians in preparation for an expedition against them.

²⁵ Matt. 26. 8.

²⁶ Mark 14. 4.

²⁷ John 12. 4.

²⁸ Matt. 20. 2.

²⁹ John 6. 7.

³⁰ In His prayer in John 17. 12, our Lord had described Judas as 'the son of perdition', where, interestingly, He used the same word as that translated 'waste' in 'Why this waste?', which Judas and others of the disciples wanted to know.³⁰ But as our Lord was quick to point out, nothing is ever wasted which is spent for Christ. 'Why this waste?' was then hardly a fitting question for 'the son of waste' to ask.

³¹ Matt. 26. 10.

³² Deut. 15. 11.

³³ Matt. 26. 10-11.

³⁴ Most of His miracles were performed for the poor. He told the rich young ruler to sell all he had, and to give the proceeds to the poor. See His parable in 25. 35-40.

³⁵ Luke 10. 42.

³⁶ We might say therefore, in the language of the apostle Paul, that to Judas the fragrance of Mary's expensive ointment proved to be a fragrance of death unto death, 2 Cor. 2. 16.

³⁷ I accept that our Lord's words do not necessarily mean that Mary had understood the full significance of what she was doing.

³⁸ John 20. 12. There is no word, please note, of Mary washing the feet of Jesus with tears – as had the woman from the city of Luke 7: Mary's tears had been shed when Lazarus died, and at that time Jesus had wept with her. But He dried all her tears long before she anointed His feet. Here, of course, Mary is neither a listener nor a mourner – but a worshipper. And I note that on each occasion Mary is found at Jesus' feet, her actions are misunderstood – first by her sister, second by the Jews, and third by Judas and others of the disciples.

³⁹ One of the possible – though I think unlikely - derivations of his strange name, Iscariot, is that it is a corruption of the Latin name for the Zealots, who wanted to rid Palestine of Roman domination by force. But clearly His unambiguous reference to His forthcoming burial meant He would never deliver Israel as Judas hoped the Messiah would.

⁴⁰ He had once heard the Lord's solemn question, 'what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?' Yet here he was, ready to sell his own soul.

⁴¹ Exod. 21. 32. What a thought. That He, who had taken on Himself the form of a bondservant to God, was sold for the value placed on a bondservant to man.

⁴² Betrayal is an ugly word, and it is an ugly deed.

⁴³ Here the word "then" probably identifies a logical connection with what preceded.

⁴⁴ Where Mary expended 2½ times as much in her extravagant act of devotion as Judas sold him for in his dreadful act of treachery. With the extravagance of the woman's love and the meanness of the betrayer's deed. In Luke 7 we read of another woman who anointed our Lord, interestingly also in the house of a Simon – not there 'Simon the leper' but 'Simon the Pharisee'.⁴⁴ In the language of our Lord, the woman of Luke 7 was a "five hundred denarii" debtor; whereas the woman of Matthew 26 was a commended "three hundred denarii" worshipper. Our Lord said of the woman of the city that she 'loved much'. And I don't think there can be any doubt that He would have said as much of Mary. I suggest therefore that it is right to speak of 'the extravagance of love'.

⁴⁵ Peter once wrote, 'to you therefore who believe, He is precious'. Yes, but how precious, I ask?