

Is Jesus your Means, or your End?

Mark 14:1-11

Introduction:

Have you heard the expression: “It’s a means to an end.” For example: a bus is a means to an end. Why do you catch a bus? Is it because you love you love buses, you love bouncing around, and stopping every 500 metres? No, a bus is just something you use because you want to get from A to B. On the other hand if you go down the Great Ocean road, you can pay money to go on a joy flight. You take off in a small plane, fly around a for bit and land back in the same spot. It not transporting you anywhere; going for a joy flight is an end in itself.

We could say something similar about relationships: For example, when I go to the supermarket, I might chat with the person at the checkout: “How’s your day? Anything interesting happened?” But of course, I haven’t gone to the supermarket for a chat. Truth be told, this person is a means to an end. I am meeting them because I want to get some food. My relationship with my wife, is of course different. I mean: How unromantic would it be if on Valentine’s Day I said: “O wife: you are altogether useful to me. Your cooking is sufficient for my good health, and I think that without you, I’d frequently run out of clean clothing.” I can appreciate those things, but that not why I love her. I love her because... well when it really comes down to it: I just love her. She is an end, not a means.

Now today, I want you to think about how you relate to Jesus: Do you see Him as a means to an end? Or as an end in himself?

We’re on p.1448 in our new bibles, at the start of chapter 14. You may have heard of the Last Supper; well this is the story of the second-last supper. And today I’d like us to:

First, imagine the scene; what would it have been like? How would you have responded to the situation that comes up? Second, I want us to try and understand two of the characters. Finally, to reflect on our own hearts.

Imagine the scene:

OK, let’s go to dinner at the house of Simon the Leper. Around the room are Jesus and some of his friends, unwinding after a big day. For the last week, they’ve have been staying in this village just outside the city, and travelling in each day. And of course Jesus has said a few times that he expects that on one of these days he’ll be arrested & killed. From the way things have been going recently between Jesus and the chief priests: it seems that it might sooner rather than later. So, its a bit tense.

O look: a woman comes in with an expensive jar of perfume. This is nothing unusual.

Pause the story: let me tell you something from my own experience. Some of you know that I lived for a couple of years in a very traditional part of the Middle East. And when the neighbourhood blokes got together at someones house, we’d recline on cushions, have blokey conversations about guns and fishing, & have to something to eat and drink, and then towards the end of the visit, the host would go the next room and come back with a jar of perfume. And he’d pass it round the circle, we’d give it a squirt and so that everyone could go home smelling nice. Smells are very important in the middle east. That’s how you honour your guests.

Anyway, back the bible story: This woman is holding a large jar, with about a litre of perfume in it: then she smashes the top off and pours every last drop of it on Jesus’ head. It must have run down his cheeks, his clothing, and onto his feet... can you smell it filling the house?

And its not \$7 Brut, either, It’s a perfume imported all the way from Himalayan mountains in Nepal. So, someone does the maths and figures out that it’s worth a whole years wages. We are talking a \$50 000 jar of perfume! It don’t know how she got it: Maybe it was a wedding gift, maybe it had been handed down from her grandmother. How do you feel about this?

Some people there feel that this is a terrible waste. And in their war against waste they tell her off. See from their point of view, that could have been used for ministry: we could have sold it and helped the poor! But notice Jesus’ response in verses 6 & 7: “*Leave her alone. Why are you bothering her?*”

She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me."

Now Jesus is not saying: who cares about the poor! He's actually using words which come from our Old Testament bible reading, which was all about a lifestyle of being generous: "*There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward ...[the] poor and needy in your land.*" And guys, it not as if she's spending your money! If you want to give to the poor, go and do it!

No, Jesus is pointing out how this is a special moment in the history of the world. Because very soon, he will be killed (In that culture, you show honour and respect even to dead bodies by putting perfume on them.) So, what she's done is actually so appropriate for that moment.

Some people think what the poor really need is cash. And sure, cash can help, it can get you through a tough time. But will cash turn your life around? Will cash deal with the hurts, and the scars, and the habits that are holding you back? Actually to try and solve poverty just by throwing is cash at it, it to underestimate how deeply broken our society is. Jesus says that what the poor ultimately need is for him to die: for him to give his life as a ransom for many. Because all social problems can be traced back to sin, and the shame and selfishness it creates. (Not that if you're poor you are a worse sinner; it may well be that you're a victim of other people's sins.) But sin is the core problem. But how does Jesus deal with sin?

At the cross. It's through the death of Jesus for sinners, that we can receive forgiveness, and we can begin to live without the heavy weight of guilt, and without the darkness of shame, and through faith in Jesus can begin to rebuild our broken lives. And so this is a special moment in the history of the world. I don't know exactly how much this woman understood of all that - but it seems that her act of love at this moment is more significant, and more beautiful, than she realises!

Understand the characters:

Can we think a bit more about a couple of characters in this story?

First of all the woman. This story gets told by a few different people in the bible. One of people who was at that dinner was John, and in his book, he says that this woman's name was Mary (John 12:3). Mary is the sister of Lazarus, who Jesus brought back from the dead. So she has a lot to be thankful for. Mary is also, can we say, a serial offender in not-being-very-practical. Do you remember there is a story in the book of Luke, where Jesus visits her house, and her sister Martha is running around doing all the housework and practical things, while Mary wants to just sit and listen to Jesus talk?

And in our story today she's not thinking about all the practical uses that the jar of perfume could be put to... All she's thinking about is: "I want to love and honour Jesus. He is my world." So, Mary is a repeat offender at this, but Jesus is her repeat defender.

Now, the second character we'll think about is one of Jesus' followers named Judas Iscariot. It seems that the person most offended by Mary's action. And again, in the book of John, we have a bit more information about what was going on with him. It says: "*He did not say this* (see, Judas was one of the people telling Mary off) *because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it*" (John 12:6).

So here is someone who is supposed to be one of the main followers of Jesus, and he's a crook! Shocking... just like this weeks news about George Pell is shocking. See when Judas does the maths on the perfume, he's not really thinking about how much it will help the poor, he thinking about the benefit to himself: "If I can skim, say 20% of it, that's a pretty good day's work!"

What motivated Judas to become a follower of Jesus? Was he impressed by Jesus' miracles? Did he think that Jesus would be the kind of king who'll give special privileges to his friends? He's doesn't seem very impressed with the fact that Jesus keeps on talking about going and dying. To Judas, it doesn't sound like it's going to be very successful plan. We're not told exactly what he was thinking.

But he really does seem stuck on the money thing. Cos the next thing he does, in Mark 14:10 is that he goes to Jesus' enemies, & gets a quote to hand Jesus over to them: "How much will you pay me

for Jesus?" For Judas, it a case of: "Well Jesus doesn't seem to be getting me what I want, so I'm going to find someone else who will."

Can you see that for Judas, Jesus is means to an end; while for Mary, Jesus is an end in himself.

Reflect on your own heart:

And so this story calls us to reflect on our own hearts. If you're here today, and you're not yet a follower of Jesus yet, can I encourage you to ask the right question? See it's possible to come here and weigh up all the benefits: "If I become a Christian, maybe God will give me a better job, or a better group of friends, or better health, or some sort of social advantages..." Maybe he will, he can do that! But it's not about a simple cost-benefit calculation. If those are the things that you're coming to Jesus for, you may be missing the point.

In fact, the time may come when Jesus doesn't give you what you came for. And you may find yourself frustrated, disappointed. Like when you put your money in the Coke machine and it doesn't give you anything back.

The greatest thing that Jesus offers you is the gift of himself. He offers you the chance to get your relationship right with God through him, to enjoy God in him. A guy called Thomas a-Kempis once said: "A wise lover values not so much the gift of the lover as the love of the giver." And so, as you check out Christianity, as you try to make sense of the bible the question, what I want you to ask, is this: "Who is Jesus? Is he someone I should love?" Is he as beautiful, as loving, and as real as all these people at church seem to think he is? We're made to love someone or something; what did Freddie Mercury sing: "Can't anybody find me somebody to love?" I can find someone for you - Jesus.

Now, here's a thing: when we receive Jesus himself, when we respond to his love with love, there are actually all sorts of benefits that come. See, think about Mary: her greatest treasure is Jesus. She honours him, he is her God, and the result is that she will also receive honour. That's what Jesus says in verse 9: "*Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.*" And so, thousands of years later, on the other side of the world, we are talking about her, and admiring what she did.

Judas Iscariot on the other hand, just the mention of his name brings up shame. He is the betrayer, the thief, the fake friend. Can you see that in the end, your greatest treasure will either bring you everlasting honour or everlasting shame?

When Judas turned his back on Jesus, he chose as his god the letter "S" with a line through it: He chose to live for a god who is powerless to save, powerless to bring you lasting honour. The same thing can be said of the gods of success, gods popularity, and the gods of pleasure.

However, if Jesus is your treasure, then you have a God who is a powerful saviour, who has proved that he is able to do what he promises.

This story has something for the Christians here to remember as well. It's funny, it's something that actually can be harder to keep in focus, as you get more involved in serving Jesus. As I've reflected on Mary's impractical act of love for Jesus; it made me reflect on how easy it is to come to church full of all sorts of concerns: "Are all the people who are serving today organised? Do the dinner people know they are rostered on? Do visitors know how to find their way to the church hall?" And yes we do need to manage those things - they are all really helpful. But ultimately, why are we here? Why do we do any of this? Why do we even think about reaching out to the world around us?

Isn't it because we love Jesus? Isn't it because we want to draw near to our beautiful saviour. We want to honour the one who gave his life for us! We want to honour our powerful saviour who defeated death and has invited us into an eternal enjoyment of God. Let me finish with a poem:

Two ways to think of Jesus:
For profit, or as worthy.
One way it leads to darkness,
One way it leads to glory.

To come and seek a profit,
Will surely disappoint ya'.
'Cos Jesus' road is windy:
For death he was anointed.

But death-for-us is wondrous!
It saves us from despair;
It takes away our need to judge,
We love: without a care! [*See Luke 10:41]

And silver, if I have it:
Is for the poor today.
A love gift to the One who is,
Worth all I do and say.