

Sermon for Sunday 6th April 2025 Lent 5

Holmbury St. Mary & Wotton St. John

Readings: Phil 3: 4b-14; John 12:1-8

Prayer

Introduction

A lady went to see her doctor, who told her she had only six months to live. "Doctor, doctor, whatever shall I do?" She gasped. "Marry an accountant," suggested the doctor. "Why?" she asked, "will that make me live longer?" "No," replied the doctor. "But it will SEEM longer."

I am a boring accountant. One of the most biting criticisms of accountants, and not without some truth, is that they know the cost of everything but the value of nothing.

Mary's gift

And that seems to be the problem with Judas in our reading from John's Gospel.

Jesus is enjoying a feast at the home of Martha and Mary, sometime after he has raised their brother Lazarus from the dead. The two sisters are incredibly grateful to him, and show it in their own ways. As usual Martha is busy cooking, whereas Mary is acting quite outrageously. She has let down her hair, which, in that culture, was a bit like a woman hitching her skirt right up above her knees in public. Then she takes this astonishingly expensive perfume. Judas estimates its cost as a year's earnings – possibly £20,000 at today's minimum wage. She pours it on Jesus's feet.

Many years ago I asked my boss, what she thought I should get my wife for Christmas. She recommended perfume, and suggested Chanel No.5. I went to the department store and, to my shame, took one look at the price, and immediately went searching for something else. A new kitchen appliance would be a much better use of money. Like Judas, I was balancing costs and benefits in my head. So how do we assess something's value?

For **Judas**, the value of the perfume was measured by the price it could fetch and what could be done with the money. His stated desire to help the poor is commendable and fully in line with Jesus' teaching, even if it was tempered by a degree of self-interest.

For **Mary**, the value of the perfume was expressed by how she could use it to honour Jesus. No extravagance was too great to tell Jesus how much she loved him. Her act was one of pure devotion.

Jesus defends her. He appreciates Mary's heartfelt offering. But he also sees deeper. For him the value of the perfume lay in the future. He knew that in five days he would be brutally killed and his body hurriedly placed in a tomb. Mary's act was prophetic: she had anointed his body in advance for burial. Just as people today send flowers to the bereaved, anointing a body was a way of honouring the dead and expressing sympathy and grief. Mary's perfume hadn't been wasted at all.

Worship

Another word for value is **Worth**. Something may be worth more to me than to you for all sorts of reasons. I don't want to part with something of value to me unless it is in exchange for something of equal or greater worth.

From this word *Worth* we get the English word *Worship* or **Worship**. We offer our worship to whatever is of greatest value to us. For Judas it was money. For Mary it was Jesus. Pouring out the perfume was a true act of worship.

Humankind is made to worship. We will worship whatever it is that we value most and this will take first place in our thoughts and hearts. For us it may be material things, pleasure, comfort, or relationships with family and others. Our worship will guide our priorities and our decisions, often subconsciously. That is why the Bible is so full of warnings about idolatry. God is our creator and our purpose. He is of ultimate worth. He has given us all things richly to enjoy, but when we give these things our devotion instead of him, we are missing our purpose and dishonouring him. We are worshipping something that he has made and given to us, instead of the Giver. In Romans 1 Paul says that humankind has exchanged the glory of the immortal God for mere images, worshipping created things instead of their Creator.

Paul's Passion

Before computers, we accountants used to spend a lot of time adding up columns of numbers and trying to make them balance. Tom Wright tells a story about John Keble, the great hymn writer and theologian. At one stage he was made the bursar of his college in Oxford. One year Keble's accounts were stubbornly out of balance by nearly two thousand pounds. Eventually the

mystery was solved. He had written the date at the top of the page, and then added the number of the year— 1820—into his column of credits.

In our reading from Philippians, Paul uses an analogy from the world of book-keeping. He lists his impressive CV, full of credits. Circumcised on the correct day, a pure-blooded citizen of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a true blooded Hebrew. He was a Pharisee - strictly obeying the letter of the Jewish law. He was so zealous that he harshly persecuted the fledgling church. A huge list of credits, and, with respect to legalistic righteousness, not one fault – not a single debit!

However, he says here that everything he once thought of as profit, all these credits in his account, he now regards as debits or loss. I once tried to illustrate this to a Sunday School class by showing them my degree certificates and professional qualifications. I then calmly tore them up. The children were aghast. Paul is saying that he now regards everything that went before that monumental moment on the Damascus Road as garbage.

So what had changed? He says he now has one enormous credit: the *surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus his Lord*. Compared to this, everything else is worthless: He has realised that all these other things are obstacles to him getting to know Jesus better. Weights holding him down in his Christian race. Distractions and false gods that suck away his worship.

One thing

Both our readings today are about Value, or Worth, and what we worship.

I began today's service with a verse from Psalm 27:

One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple.

Paul uses this same expression, "one thing", he says, *I haven't achieved perfection, but I focus on this **one thing**: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us*. He is using the analogy of a race. His eye is firmly fixed on the prize of coming face to face with Jesus. Like any good athlete, past falls and failures are forgotten, and must not be allowed to distract him from the goal.

You may recall another account of Martha and Mary entertaining Jesus, in Luke's Gospel. Mary is sitting at Jesus's feet, dwelling in his presence and drinking deeply of his teaching. Martha, meanwhile, is distracted by all the preparations needed. Jesus says to her, "*Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only **one thing** is needed. Mary has chosen what is better.*"

This phrase "**one thing**" speaks to me very strongly. David the psalmist, Paul, and Mary all felt called to a single-minded pursuit of the Lord. David passionately seeking him in the sanctuary. Paul pressing on to know Jesus. Mary sitting at his feet and pouring out her precious perfume in worship.

Jesus invites us to *Seek First* his kingdom. Are we ready to listen to his gentle call? To spend at least a part of each day focused on him alone? To begin to reorientate our lives with the Lord Jesus at the centre, not the periphery? When we do, I believe we will find that the house will be *filled with the fragrance of the perfume.*

Prayer

Lord, you are our source and our centre, our creator and our destiny. Forgive us that we are so easily distracted by many things. Forgive us our failure to give you our full attention and devotion. Help us to focus on the one thing most dear: knowing you.

Amen