

April 6, 2012

**Good Friday: The Three Hours, Part I**

Mark 14.1-11

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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In baptism, after rising from the waters of death where we have been buried with Christ, we are anointed with oil and marked as Christ's own forever. This anointing both seals and expresses our intimate relationship as a child of God. In ancient Hebrew tradition, anointing was connected with the granting of Divine Power, and was particularly associated with kings. In the story of David being chosen a king over his older brothers,<sup>1</sup> all sons of Jesse, we are told "the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on outward appearance but the Lord looks on the heart..." When the Lord had seen David, he ordered that he be anointed. "Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward." Later the Lord says that David shall be a son to him.<sup>2</sup> One who is anointed with oil is generally associated with God's power. In later times this also was bound up with the doctrine of the so-called 'Divine Right of Kings'. *Messiah*, translated, means 'anointed one', and so child of God. In Greek this Hebrew word becomes *Christos*, which as we know functions almost like a surname for Joshua bar Joseph: Jesus, the anointed one of Jesus, son of God.

The woman in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper was early on associated with Mary of Magdala who made what we recognize as an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. Jesus had already been anointed by the spirit at his baptism and had already made manifest the power of God, not least in the touching and healing of lepers such as his host. But as is often the case, the sign does not coincide in sequential or linear time with the gift.

Nonetheless, the sign gives offense: "Why was this ointment thus wasted? For this ointment might have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, (or more than a year of wages for most people,) and given to the poor." What was the concern here?

Was it for the poor? Was this concern voiced by righteous, passionate liberals who were still hoping that Jesus would lead them in some grand confrontation with the powers of this world to bring about social change, even with every sign pointing to his likely doom?

Was the concern for the poor, OR were they trying to curry favor with the guest of honor, not by criticizing the woman's unseemly and extravagant, almost erotic behavior, but by dressing up their dismay as something righteous? ("We hate the sin, of course, not the sinner".) Was that it?

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Samuel 16:1-13

<sup>2</sup> 2 Samuel 7:11-17

What else could it be? Embarrassment for the woman? Then criticism would not be the way to go. Embarrassment for the host? Then surely they would criticize Simon for letting her get near to Jesus. Even with the fairly open dining arrangements of the day, the host could have prevented this in all likelihood. Maybe they were jealous that they hadn't thought of anointing Jesus, or perhaps they just didn't approve of public displays of affection as when President holds hands with his wife in a parade.

It could be any or all of such reasons, but Jesus, as usual, cut to the heart of the matter. He was going to die. It was the elephant in the room. I cannot help but think of Andrew Young's description of the Memphis days immediately before his friend, Martin, was assassinated. He remembers King saying "Everyone here wants to drag me into your particular projects." Young says that "when they were really feeling their oats, (some leaders in the movement) acted as if Martin was just a symbol under which they operated."<sup>3</sup> He describes King as 'tired and depressed' until he began to preach to the garbage workers. "He referred to the threats against his life, and the fact that his flight from Atlanta had been delayed because of a bomb threat. But he literally sang forth: 'I've been to the mountaintop... I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have *seen* the glory of the coming of the Lord.'"<sup>4</sup>

The elephant in the dining room of the house of Simon the leper was the imminent threat of death, the impossible possibility, the anointed one could be defeated by the powers of the world. Maybe the woman's critics viscerally understood what she had done and maybe they know it really was abhorrent to them even if they did not quite know why. There is beauty around Jesus even as the mechanisms by which we do violence to one another in this world are about to be shown for what they are. No wonder they reacted, participating in the violence even as they lashed out at the woman.

"Then Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve, another insider, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them."

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<sup>3</sup> Andrew Young, *An Easy Burden* (Baylor Press, 2008) p.458

<sup>4</sup> *Easy Burden* p.462-3