

Beautiful lives



by **Tracy Cotterell**

Beautiful. I wonder if this would be one of the first words that springs to your mind to describe the life of a Jesus-follower. Most of us are probably fairly confident that Christ's disciples are called to live humble lives, sacrificial lives, wise lives . . . but beautiful lives? Isn't it intriguing, then, that Jesus commends one of his followers for having done a 'beautiful thing'?

I'm referring, of course, to the woman who attracted the criticism of the assembled diners when she 'wasted' a whole alabaster jar of expensive perfume over Jesus as he reclined at table, as we read in Matthew 26:6-13 and Mark 14:1-9. According to these Gospel writers, Jesus was in Bethany at the home of Simon the leper when a woman came to Jesus with a jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on his head as he was reclining at the table. Those who witnessed the woman's extravagant gesture were indignant and spoke harshly to her: the perfume, made of pure nard, could have been sold for a huge sum, the equivalent of a labourer's annual pay, and given to the poor. But Jesus rebuked them, 'Leave her alone. Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me.'

Perhaps it was not surprising that the guests were outraged by the woman's seemingly inappropriate behaviour. Passover approached, we read in



Mark's version of the incident. It was customary, on the evening of Passover, to remember the poor with gifts. Aside from Jesus' own teaching on the poor, they were in a season when it was natural to think about providing for the needy. What was more, the woman's perfume was exceptionally valuable. 'The best ointment is preserved in alabaster', wrote Pliny the Elder, a first century Roman scholar, author and military leader. Indeed, in some cases this highest quality of perfume would have been treated much like a family heirloom. The guests watched as the woman broke the alabaster jar and poured the whole contents over Jesus in an act of excessive generosity and abandonment.

Perhaps some also found her action

distasteful and lacking decorum. Though taking place in a home, the incident was probably more public than we imagine. In the ancient world, mealtimes were much more than re-fuelling pit stops. They were complex events which reinforced social values, boundaries, status and hierarchy. It was probably embarrassing to watch such uninhibited behaviour in such a context. Yet Jesus' verdict was that she had done a 'beautiful' thing. The word 'beautiful' here is the Greek word *καλός* (*kalos*) and it's used in a number of places in the New Testament. For example, earlier in Matthew's gospel, the disciples are encouraged to 'Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good (*καλά* i.e. noble) works and praise your Father who

is in heaven.’ (Mt 5:16). In 1 Peter 4:10 we read that, ‘each one should serve others in respect to the gift he has received, as a good (καλοί i.e. excellent, blameless) steward of the grace of God in its various forms.’ James’ epistle exhorts us, ‘Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good (καλῆς i.e. praiseworthy) life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. (Js 3:13).

In the eyes of Jesus, this ‘beautiful’ thing that the woman had done to Him was good, right, excellent, noble, precious and praiseworthy. But why? Certainly she had honoured Jesus. Her uninhibited worship spoke of whole hearted devotion and joyful thanksgiving. But Jesus saw more than that in what she had done. She had anointed his body for burial, He declared.

It was a startling interpretation and probably not one that the woman herself would have fully grasped. She had acted spontaneously but in so doing had intuitively got to the heart of things. Hers was a prophetic

peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, “Your God reigns!” No wonder Jesus declared to the critical guests, ‘I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her.’ (Mk 14: 9).

As Jesus’ disciples today, we’re invited to live such beautiful lives, too. If this sounds more superhuman than you’re feeling right now, let me tell you about some children in a primary school just down the road from where I live. A little while back, the then head teacher invited the whole school – children and staff – to think about what their values should be as a school, what should shape their corporate life, as it were. In amongst those children were a number of Christian kids who decided that being a Christian should actually shape how the school did life together. So they thought and they talked and they prayed and they went to the head teacher with their conclusion: we think that one of the values of our school should be ‘what would Jesus do?’ As it happens, this is a Church of England

whole of life – for school life, college life, home life, work life . . . church life, too. Confidence in the Gospel, in Jesus, liberates us to be fruitful wherever we are day by day – round a meal table or a meeting table. So how did this woman with the alabaster jar of very expensive perfume get to be so confident in Jesus that she acted with such boldness and beauty?

In spite of a few differences between them, the parallel accounts of the anointing in Matthew 26 and Mark 14 are widely thought to be the same event as that described in John 12. In John’s account, the woman has a name – Mary. Mary has a sister, Martha, and a brother, Lazarus. In fact, through John’s naming of Mary we know a few more things about her. We know she spent time with Jesus – she sat at His feet to listen and question and learn. We know she witnessed an extraordinary event in the raising to life of her brother. We know she lived with a family who were all shaped in different ways by their relationship with Jesus and that must have affected what they talked about and what they did. Through all this, and probably more, she became devoted to Jesus, to believe in His love for her and for others, to trust Him.

Trust leads to transformation. Transformed by such trust, men and women and children are inspired to live beautiful lives that make a difference wherever they are in today’s world. And if sometimes the world neither sees nor understands what we do, we can be sure that Jesus does, and that it delights Him. What beautiful thing might you do for Him today? 

about the writer

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‘Worship in the Spirit’ – a painting on silk (opposite page) is by Yvonne Bell. See more of her work at christian-art.vpweb.co.uk

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action that anticipated Jesus’ death. He would be killed in such a way that there might not be the chance for a proper anointing at the time, for it would be a criminal’s death. Yet it would be through His death on the cross and then His rising to life, that the whole world would be put to rights, including the needs of the poor. She was right to have made Jesus’ imminent death the prime consideration. It was a beautiful thing she had done to Him because it pointed to the way of salvation.

Beautiful lives are like that. They may be noble and praiseworthy. They may be lived with gentleness and kindness and humility. They may sometimes be bold and disturbing and exuberant. But they are primarily characterised by an ability to point to Jesus, His way, His truth and His life. Centuries earlier Isaiah had written, ‘How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim

primary school. But it also has lots of children from families of other faiths and no faith at all. So the head teacher spoke to the Muslim families about this idea of having ‘WWJD?’ as a value of the school. Jesus was a prophet, they responded, so that was fine by them. She spoke to the Hindu families and they had no objections. She spoke with families with no particular faith and they agreed this could be voted on. So ‘WWJD?’ was indeed voted on by the whole school, along with all the other suggestions of what their school values could be and ‘WWJD?’ became a value by which that school agreed they would shape their school life and decisions. What had this small group of ten year old children done? They had pointed to Jesus. They had helped staff and children see that Jesus’ way would be good news for their whole school community. They had done a beautiful thing for Him.

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