

Renouncing Gifts and Wasting Time

A sermon on John 12: 1-8 & Philippians 3:4b-14 by Nathan Nettleton, 6 April 2025

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Message

Knowing Jesus intimately is the most important thing of all, but many of our otherwise good gifts and concerns are constantly getting in the way.

Sermon

Like the apostle Paul, I went to one of “the best schools”. I know it was one of the best because the school songs we had to sing said so, and because when it’s students periodically engage in toxic anti-social behaviour, it makes the headlines, which wouldn’t be the case if they came from Poverty High School.

The conventional wisdom espoused for people who went to such schools is that we have been especially privileged and that we therefore have an obligation to make a genuine contribution to society. We are regarded as having had a head-start in life, and so since we are getting more out of life than those who lack such privileges, we should give more back.

Well, call me ungrateful if you like, but when it comes to those things in life that really matter, I’m not sure that the benefits of my privileged education actually outweigh its crippling legacy. Some wise person (was it Bishop Leslie Newbiggin, or perhaps Jacques Ellul, I can’t remember) said that our society likes to administer the gospel in small doses so as to inoculate people against catching the real thing, and on that basis I’d say my school was indeed the cream of society, because it did exactly that extremely well.

On the basis of the reading we heard from the letter to the church at Philippi, it seems that Paul shared my view that a privileged head-start in life is a poisoned chalice. Paul had an impeccable pedigree and a top-shelf education. Yet after describing his blessings-count, he says, “whatever gains I had in all this, I have come to regard these things as loss, because of Christ.” Or in other words “there might have been some positives, but I can now see that the negatives outweighed them.”

In fact he goes on to say it rather more colourfully than that. Our terribly polite English translators always make use of the seven second delay to make sure the Bible stays suitable for families, but where they have Paul saying, “I now regard these things as rubbish,” Paul’s actual word was a bit of common street Greek meaning excrement. If Paul had been speaking Australian English it would have come out as, “You might consider all this to be the perfect head start in life, but I now regard it as a load of shit. I’ve turned my back on all of it so that I can give myself totally to Christ and be embraced fully by him.”

Why? Why was Paul’s opinion of his privileged head-start so hostile that it came out in the kind of language that we have to blip out in case the kiddies are listening? I’m going to put that question on hold for just a sec, because I think that if we go and have a look at the story we heard from John’s gospel, we might find ourselves with a better angle to get back into it.

On his way to Jerusalem for the last time, Jesus spends a night enjoying a dinner party in the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. During the evening, Mary breaks open a very expensive bottle of fragrant oils. She poured out the oil and used it to massage Jesus’s feet.

Judas Iscariot has a fit and growls, “What do you think you’re doing? That stuff is worth a fortune. Why wasn’t it sold and the money put to work to do something for the poor?” But Jesus comes to her defence saying, “Get off her case, Judas! She brought that oil and kept it to use in preparing me for a decent burial. There will never be any shortage of opportunities to do something worthwhile for the poor, but you won’t always have the opportunity to do anything worthwhile for me.”

Now on the surface of it, putting aside whatever ulterior motives Judas might have had for wanting the money in the bag, he seems to be voicing a perfectly honourable ideology. Perhaps he went to a good school too and knows that you are not supposed to just milk your privileges for all they are worth, but rather take what you have acquired and give something back to society, especially to relieve the plight of those who have not had the benefits of such a good head-start in life.

The Jesus who was described in many of the churches I’ve been a part of would have backed him up on that. A good solid theology of social obligation. But the real Jesus says he was wrong.

The real Jesus honours and accepts a wasteful and extravagant gift and says that sometimes such wasteful behaviour is more important than giving to the poor. How could he even begin to justify the suggestion that giving someone – himself in fact – a foot massage with far too much of an outrageously expensive perfumed oil was a more appropriate use of time, energy and resources than taking action to relieve the plight of the poor?

This is no abstract historical question for us either. Because aren’t we doing much the same thing? Aren’t we gathered here right now committing time, energy and some pretty expensive resources to a similarly wasteful and non-productive act of devotion?

Couldn’t it easily be argued that we could far better put the time and resources into doing something useful? Into doing something that would actually be of some tangible benefit to the world or at least some of its less privileged occupants? What are we doing singing songs and praying prayers when the people of Myanmar are still trying to pull their loved ones out of the earthquake rubble? Why don’t we get out there and do something useful?!

They’re fair questions – tough questions even – but Jesus doesn’t give the simple answer that might have been expected. And neither does Paul, because he takes all the things that people commonly see as placing a person in the ideal place to make a worthwhile, benevolent contribution to society, and writes them off as a load of shit. “They get in the way of what really matters,” he says.

And perhaps Jesus is saying the same thing – that even such worthy desires as to do something about the plight of the poor can get in the way of what really matters. To Mary, what really mattered was intimacy with Jesus. And Paul says that what really matters is to know Christ, to be united with him in life, death and resurrection. And that, he says, is a tough race that still lies ahead of him.

I don’t think I’m stretching it too far to say that he seems to be implying that it is a tougher race still for those who had the privileged head-start. Why? Well I can only tell you why it is

for me, and that's that after a head start like that I am so addicted to the feeling that I can control the world myself and fix its problems and contribute meaningfully to its welfare that it is almost impossible to bring myself to release my grip and just love and be loved and trust God to call the shots. At a very formative stage of my life, I was shaped with a sense of ego and entitlement and power, and it all gets in the way and cripples me.

I think that the truth that Paul and Jesus were both pointing to here is that those of us who, like Judas, are convinced that the welfare of the world is dependent on our precious gifts, usually end up causing more problems than we solve. Perhaps that's partly because we tend to separate ourselves from the needy world and so address every issue but our own.

By contrast, those who are willing to be so irresponsible and wasteful as to commit their first energies to knowing Jesus intimately in genuine devotion and worship begin to be transfigured in the image of Jesus and face up to their own brokenness. That enables them to approach the world with quite a different attitude.

And I can tell you that when the poor and needy are on the receiving end of our efforts at addressing their plight, they have no trouble telling the difference between those who see the face of Jesus in them and pour out their gifts accordingly, and those who think the world should be grateful to have the benefit of their privileged gifts and attention.

Each time we gather for worship, in laying aside our compulsions to remake the world as we think it should be, and just become part of a congregation who indulge in this wasteful and unproductive celebration of God; we are in fact, almost incidentally, offering a great gift to the world.

Because if you want a glimpse of heaven just picture the intimate communion between Mary and Jesus at that dinner party and you'll realise that worship itself brings at least one little bit of the world more in tune with that picture. And more than that it sends us back out to the poor who will always be with us with a greater ability to love instead of just a social obligation to do charity.

So perhaps the wasteful extravagance of our worship is not so disconnected from the needs of the real world. Opening ourselves to intimate communion with Jesus is opening ourselves to the most world-changing power in the universe.

But let me close with a warning before we all congratulate ourselves too much. Our willingness to involve ourselves in worship does not prove that we are opening ourselves to intimacy with Jesus. We all know that a man giving perfume to his wife could just as likely be doing it to disguise his unwillingness to open himself up to her in real intimacy.

I can attest from my own struggles to reverse the inoculation of my privileged upbringing, that the best way to avoid intimacy with Jesus is to put on a good facade of religious devotion. We can go through the motions so convincingly that we might even pull the wool over our own eyes, but our actions are more about maintaining our image of respectability and competence. We don't make fools of ourselves for Jesus in the way that lovers have always made fools of themselves for the ones they love.

And as Frederick Buechner said, whether our worship is “a Quaker Meeting, a Pontifical High Mass, the Family Service at First Presbyterian, (or) a Holy Roller Happening — unless there is an element of joy and foolishness in the proceedings, the time would be better spent doing something useful.” (Wishful Thinking, HarperSanFrancisco 1993, p.122)