

# **“Journey with Jesus: Village Experience”**

**Sunday 6 September 2009  
Rev Brian Senior**

## **Readings:**

Psalm 103:1-8  
Matthew 26:6-13

## **Sermon**

It's good, when you live in a town, to get out into the country.

We came back from our holiday last Sunday afternoon ... we had a wet and windy week in Cornwall, followed by a cool and breezy week in Dorset. So much for staying in this country because of the recession, with the promise of a really good summer!

Still ... we had an enjoyable break, and a rest from the busyness of everyday life, and it was good. For the second week we were camping very near to Corfe Castle, not far from Swanage ... and it was about a mile's walk across the fields to the village itself.

On the Wednesday morning we encountered a herd of cows which had escaped from their field onto the footpath as we walked to the Church to attend the mid-week communion service. At the service there were four elderly ladies, the Vicar and us three ... but we were made very welcome, and it was interesting to chat to the Vicar after the service about his experience of ministry there, after many years in Huddersfield – quite a contrast!

If you know the area you will know that Corfe Castle is a beautiful village ... picturesque without being quaint ... quite busy with tourists visiting the castle ruins and sheltering from the rain in the National Trust tea-shop.

For us, the village felt like a place of retreat ... a place to recharge the batteries before coming back to a busy time in the life of the Church. Somewhere familiar ... but a place that feels special, even so.

I think Bethany must have been something like that for Jesus. Not a place to visit historic ruins, of course, but a special place none the less ... a place of retreat ... and mostly because of the people who lived there.

Bethany was the home of Martha and Mary and their brother Lazarus ... the one who Jesus had raised from the dead. It was a place where he was always welcomed ... he stayed there when he was in Jerusalem, since it was only a short journey out of the city, just over the other side of the Mount of Olives.

Martha was a great hostess ... always busy in the kitchen and making a fuss of her guests, while Mary loved to sit at Jesus' feet and listen to him teaching. It caused a bit of tension between the two sisters ... but even so, their home was a place where Jesus could go and get some rest, among friends, and away from the crowds.

It was to Bethany that Jesus came, with his disciples, when he was on his way to Jerusalem for the last time ... and it was to Bethany that he returned on the evening of what we call Palm Sunday ... after he rode into the city on the donkey. He spent the night there, and each night before his arrest.

On this occasion, though, Jesus was not at Lazarus' house, but at the home of a man known as 'Simon the Leper'.

We don't know anything about Simon, except that he cannot have been a leper. Lepers were excluded from society, and unable to live at home. They were driven out of local communities and formed leper colonies away from the public. A leper could certainly not have invited people to a meal.

Unless, of course, he had been cured!?

And since there was no known cure for leprosy at the time, we can probably assume that this Simon is a man who has been healed by Jesus ... and that his nickname 'Simon the Leper' had stuck, as a bit of a joke. The Leper who did not have Leprosy.

Perhaps Simon had invited Jesus and his disciples for a meal as an act of gratitude for his healing ... we can't be sure, but it seems like a reasonable guess. There they were, away from the crowds, enjoying a relaxed meal among friends ... and then something extraordinary occurred.

A woman came into the room with an alabaster jar of perfume.

There are certain smells we associate with village life ... roses in a cottage garden, perhaps? In Corfe Castle there is still a village bakery, but we also experienced more more obviously 'county' smells, like the cows which we met on the footpath.

But in Jesus' village experience, no-one expected the scent of expensive perfume.

All four gospels tell a similar story. Mark's is almost exactly the same as Matthew's, but in Luke and in John the details are different ... so perhaps there was more than one event a bit like this. In Matthew's account, the woman is not identified ... and there are no clues as to who she was or why she did what she did. But what she did was extraordinary.

What prompted this woman to come?

- Was she someone Jesus had healed?
- Was she someone who had received his forgiveness?
- Was she someone who had an understanding of who Jesus really was?

We don't know.

But there, in this little village, where even to Jesus the coming, dreadful events of the next few days must have seemed far away and unreal ... she came and anointed his head.

What do we notice about this?

- It was unexpected
- It was extravagant
- and
- It was misunderstood

... but it was received by Jesus as an act of love.

- This woman's actions were unexpected, not only because it was an unusual thing to do, but because it was culturally inappropriate. Men and women who were neither married nor closely blood related did not usually speak to one-another, let alone touch one-another, as she touched Jesus. Her actions were outrageous ... shocking, even.

It was the wrong action in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong people ... at least according to what was normal acceptable practice. This woman put her reputation on the line.

- Her actions were extravagantly costly. A jar of good quality perfume is expensive in any generation ... but according to Mark's gospel, the perfume she used could have represented a year's wages. What she did was generous to a fault ... or, depending on your viewpoint, dreadfully wasteful.
- Her actions were misunderstood, because those who were present did not understand what her motives were, or how Jesus received what she did for him. They hadn't grasped that this was a symbolic act ... an anointing in preparation for his burial, which was soon to come. Only Jesus saw it for what it was ... a beautiful act of pure devotion, for which this woman will be remembered for ever.

This woman went beyond convention, and at great personal cost, to show the depth of her devotion to Jesus. She risked criticism, indignation and the hostility of those who were present, although their protests about raising money for the poor were really a smokescreen for their own jealousy. Judas Iscariot, who shouted the loudest, was a thief and a traitor, and he would later accept money from the Temple Treasury in payment for his betrayal of Jesus.

Why did she do it, this woman?

- As a simple act of love.
- As a prophetic statement of what was soon to come ... a preparation for Jesus' death.

The reaction of the disciples was at best an indication of their lack of understanding, and at worst a sign of their hypocrisy. How easy it is to criticise ... to say that money spent on an act of devotion could be better spent ... either on tackling matters of social injustice, or directly for helping the poor ... but to hold back on freely offering our own resources.

Jesus said:

*"The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me."*

Are we any less hypocritical than they were? Extravagance towards God does not stop us from being generous to the poor ... but so often we hold on to what we have, in order to ensure we have plenty, while others do not have enough.

This passage really challenges our own response to Jesus. Consider for a moment:

- What if our love for Jesus led us to do something which shocked our friends, families and neighbours, and took us right outside our own 'comfort zone'?
  - That might mean 'going public' about our faith in a way you have never done before ... letting it be known that you are a follower of Jesus. It might mean

anything from speaking out against injustice, or refusing to join in with juicy gossip at the school gate.

- It might mean standing up against any kind of behaviour which is incompatible with being a Christian ... or even telling someone why you go to Church and what it means to be a Christian.
- What if our response to Jesus costs us a lot financially ... whether because of what we give, or what we give up, in order to honour him. God's call to holy living may mean that some sources of income are not acceptable ... some investments are unethical ... some ways of earning money are inappropriate for us as Christian disciples.
  - As believers we will have a different attitude to our money than before we believed. We come to understand that all that we have comes from God, and also belongs to God.
- What if our love for Jesus meant that we were often misunderstood, or criticised?
  - We may be ridiculed because we change the way we live, the things that occupy our time, or the new priorities we have in life. Old friends may not understand why we don't drink too much or try not to swear ... or because we have changed our attitude to what we watch on television, or the things that make us laugh ... and most especially because we choose to honour the name of Jesus.
  - It may be that, unlike the woman who risked her reputation when she came and anointed Jesus' head, that our reputation needs to change for the better.

If all of this sounds like living the Christian life means making some sacrifices, then that is true. Salvation through Jesus is completely free ... we cannot earn it in any way ... but once we have come to be his disciples there is a price to pay, in how we live our lives.

We do it not because we must, but because we love. Real love cannot leave us unchanged ... it demands a response. If we truly love God, we will want to live our lives to please him.

But remember ... whatever we may give for God ... or whatever we may give *up* for God ... in response to Jesus' love, is nothing compared to what he has given, and given up for us. The love God has poured out on us through Jesus is so much more than we could ever earn ... and infinitely more than we could ever begin to repay.

Jesus did it all, of course:

- He stepped outside his comfort zone ... in a way beyond our imagining.
- He paid the highest price ... the most generous gift ever ... in laying down his life.
- He was misunderstood, criticised, beaten and crucified ... and all for love of us.

How much are we prepared to give ... or to give up ... for him?