

# She Anointed His Feet

Passion Sunday – 6<sup>th</sup> April 2025 - Canon Neil Patterson

Isaiah 43.16-21, Philippians 3.4b-14, John 12.1-8

A little while ago I called in on Roger, our Head Verger, in his office in the North Cloister. On his desk were a number of somewhat mysterious-looking little bottles, bearing evocative labels – jasmine, cassia, lavender, balsam. In other contexts, this might be evidence of a new beauty regime or the testing office of a perfumier. But what he was up to, of course, was getting ready to prepare the holy oils for the Bishop to bless on Maundy Thursday. It is a particular devotion on his part to concoct a subtly different recipe each year to mark the significance of the oil, especially the oil of chrism.

Because this morning's Gospel is absolutely about the significance of anointing oil, and part of the sense of it is in the need for it to be prepared – domestic, personal, perhaps even intimate. But let's do a quick whizz round the languages first, because we have too many words meaning the same thing. "Could he be the Messiah?" say those who meet Jesus and see his works. Messiah, meaning 'anointed' in Hebrew, and used for all those kings, priests and prophets anointed for their role in the Old Testament. We'll come back to them.

In Greek, to anoint is *chrío*, from which we get both chrism (stuff for anointing with) and Christ, meaning Messiah, meaning anointed. And then the Latin for anointing is *unctio*, as in Extreme Unction, which sounds like an adventure craze, for recording on TikTok! Until you remember that Extreme means 'approaching death' and it is altogether more serious. And the English word 'anoint' comes through French from the Latin *in-unctio* as well. Boiled down to plain language, the meaningful 'I anointed her with oil of Chrism' could just be rather dully rendered 'I oiled her with oil for oiling.' The old words are nice and make it more interesting, but they are not in themselves very important.

So, where does the specialness come from? Anointing is almost entirely confined to quite well-managed religious circumstances today. If, later in the service this morning, I were to bring a flask of oil from where they are kept in the Eastern Lady Chapel, ask the Dean to bless it, and then go pour it over, say, Oliver Hibbert and declare him King of Bristol, you would all be rather surprised. Oliver would probably be a bit put out, and ask me what I was doing. I would very likely come to my senses, admit that I had been overcome by a most un-Church-of-England burst of spiritual fervour, and offer to pay his dry-cleaning bill. We would all laugh it off without admitting anything to the Lord Lieutenant about this possible act of treason.

As we know, that is somewhat how anointing is depicted in places in the Old Testament, at least in a few instances where prophets have a call to identify a new king out of the expected pattern. But mostly, I think, it happened in circumstances of dignified protocol, where a new king was made, or a new priest took office. And this is how it has been taken up by the Christian church in subsequent centuries. Practice varies across different churches and times, but it generally takes its place within specific rites and uses a very modest quantity of oil. As far as I can recall, I have personally only been anointed once, on my hands at my ordination as a priest, and it fitted that moment well.

What marks out most anointing both in Scripture and Christian tradition is that it seems to involve important people being anointed by other important people. Samuel, who anointed Saul as king and then

David when Saul had failed, had governed the Israelites for decades. High priests of the Temple and prophets resident at court anointed later kings. For a while Popes anointed Holy Roman Emperors, Archbishops of Reims, Kings of France, and of course down even to this 21<sup>st</sup> century the Archbishop of Canterbury anoints our own Kings and Queens. And although in some Christian traditions anointing with oil is more widespread, in the Church of England there is a strong tendency for it to be restricted to priests in anointing the sick, and even more to bishops at ordinations and confirmations.

The importance of anointing cannot just rest, though, on this interesting tradition of marking succession to important roles. Even though it has found its way into the language as we might say we are looking to spot the 'anointed one' who will succeed +Viv as our bishop, or even, saints preserve us, those who declare Donald Trump to be the Lord's Anointed. It matters because we worship Jesus Christ, Jesus the Messiah, Jesus the Anointed. And when we look at his anointing against that tradition, something very different and important can be seen. Admittedly, sometimes we say (for example in Eucharistic Prayers) that he was 'anointed by the Holy Spirit at his baptism' which is in a sense true. And you can't get much more 'important person anointing important person' than the Holy Spirit bodily descending from God the Father on his Only Son. But I feel that's cheating a bit, because there was no oil! And it also fits the unfortunate tendency of theology to sometimes minimise what Scripture actually tells us when that doesn't fit the wider pattern.

Because the anointing that does happen in the Gospels is the anointing at Bethany, and it is not like those of which I have been speaking. Not like them at all. Jesus is not anointed by a prophet or a priest, but by a friend. Immensely significantly, by a woman, unlike all those grand anointings I have mentioned. He is not anointed by the pillar of the Temple or amidst the officers of his army whilst trumpets sound, but in the quiet of a house where he is preparing for his last days of witness. And it seems to me that he must have been feeling already some of the trepidation that we see in his prayer at Gethsemane and his words from the Cross, and that this beautiful gesture of love was intended to, and did, give him the strength to carry on. It was the loving and intimate nature of Mary's anointing that made me think of Roger tenderly preparing the oils.

But the real power is the sheer difference of Jesus' anointing in this way – and it is to this that our other readings speak. Isaiah sings of the 'new thing' that God is about to do to transform his relationship with his people. And in Philippians, Paul describes all his inheritance and learning as 'loss' compared to knowing Christ. Indeed, he uses a vivid word, *skubala*, rendered in our modern translations as 'rubbish,' literally, 'what is thrown away' but in the Authorised Version it is given as 'offscourings' which makes me think of the revolting slops bin in a school canteen. Because in the one who came and was anointed, not enthroned in power but by a woman friend at home, all the values of the world are changed, and the lowly lifted up. And part of the challenge to us all is to reflect on the inheritances and securities to which we have clung, and which are in reality as cast-off rubbish besides the reality of knowing Christ.

We are at that moment in the Church's year where Holy Week is imminent, and so I want to end by urging you to join in as much of the observation as possible, because in the end it is by taking ourselves in heart and mind to the streets of Jerusalem and the rooms of Bethany and the foot of the Cross that we become participants in that same story with Mary, Martha and Lazarus, and come to see the world transformed. Yes, there will be beautiful music and wise and insightful preaching and reflection, but with respect to my musical and ministerial colleagues, the story is the thing. And at the heart of that story is the Son of God who made himself as nothing for the redemption of us all.