

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

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Speaker: Mr. Jonathan Hughes

Christ and us as seen in the Gospel of Mark: Opportunities

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times; it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness; it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity; it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness; it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair."

"It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known."

Good morning and don't worry - you have tuned in to Premier Radio's *Truth for Today* programme, rather than some English language classics broadcast. The above are two quotes from probably my favourite story from the classics - Charles Dickens' "A tale of two cities".

This morning, as we conclude our series on Christ and us as seen in the Gospel of Mark, we will begin by looking at a tale of two women in Mark 12 and Mark 14, before finishing with a tale of two men in Mark 15.

A tale of two women

Let us start then by reading about these two women before we learn some of the lessons that they so eloquently teach us without even speaking a word. *"Now Jesus sat opposite the treasury and saw how the people put money into the treasury. And many who were rich put in much. Then one poor widow came and threw in two mites, which make a quadrans. So He called His disciples to Himself and said to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all those who have given to the treasury; for they all put in out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all that she had, her whole livelihood'"* (Mark 12:41-44).

And then in Mark 14:3-9, *"And being in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper, as He sat at the table, a woman came having an alabaster flask of very costly oil of spikenard. Then she broke the flask and poured it on His head. But there were some who were indignant among themselves, and said, 'Why was this fragrant oil wasted? For it might have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor.' And they criticized her sharply. But Jesus said, 'Let her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a good work for Me. For you have the poor with you always, and whenever you wish you may do them good; but Me you do not have always. She has done what she could. She has come beforehand to anoint My body for burial. Assuredly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her.'"*

These two women teach us so much, but particularly speak to us about what lies at the heart of real worship. Without wishing to be critical of others, it does seem to me to be that these days worship is considered as singing a catchy tune to a lively song and feeling emotional about it. Don't get me wrong - I would much rather sing a good song to a pleasant tune than a bad one to a miserable tune, but worship must start with a deep and lasting appreciation of the worth of God. These two women had that appreciation in bucket loads and then expressed it in the field of giving.

The incident concerning the widow (see Mark 12:41-44) is set in the context of Jesus being questioned by the Pharisees and Sadducees. After all, isn't true spirituality to be found in debating really complex moral and religious issues? These boys could really talk the talk! Then along comes this widow. Perhaps she had heard some of the questions. Maybe it had all gone straight over her head - long words she didn't know the meaning of, questions about stuff she had never even realised were questionable. But such is her appreciation of God that she puts into the temple treasury two mites - a fraction of a penny which was a working man's wage in those days. Money from the treasury was used for building and maintenance of the Temple. I'm sure she thought that, as the place where God dwelt, He deserved the very best kind of house and that could only be by people generously giving. What she gave was tiny in monetary value - enough only to keep a labourer busy for an hour or so. However, Jesus understands the true value of what this widow gave. She had seized the opportunity to give all that she had - her whole livelihood!

Sometimes preachers carelessly talk about the widow's mite - the Bible never does! There were two mites, and she gave them both. She could have kept one back, giving only half of all she had. But no! She gives away everything - her whole life and all her tomorrows were now firmly in God's hands. If she was to buy her bread tomorrow, or a little

oil to heat and light the place she called home, then it was going to be because God had provided for her. What an adventure of faith! It would be one that would scare me silly and for which my faith is utterly inadequate. Brave, courageous faithful woman!

The second woman we read about was Mary, sister to Martha and Lazarus, who lived in Bethany. As I read the four Gospels I think we see that Jesus came to Jerusalem, triumphantly entering the city at the beginning of the crucifixion week. His habit was then to retire to Bethany each evening. If Jesus died on a Friday, then the events of Mark 14 occurred on the Wednesday evening, the last time that Jesus was in Bethany before His death. Did Mary have a sense of this? Had she pondered whether her actions were proper or not, or if she should give as much as she did, and left it until the following evening, she would have been too late. She would have missed her last chance to honour Jesus in the way that she did. I wonder how many opportunities there have been in my life for me to give - my time, my money, my affection and help - and I have let them slip. No doubt I was sensibly evaluating the best course of action. But sometimes God puts it into our hearts to do something for Him and we just need to do it. That was certainly the case with Mary. She potentially gave up her whole life in this one act, and yet she did it for Jesus' sake. I am reminded of a great preacher and teacher, who in my opinion deserved to fill football stadiums every time he spoke. And yet he quietly over many years served a quite small congregation. He could have gone somewhere more glamorous, but he too, like Mary, had heard the call to give his all to the situation that God had put him in. His actions were just like Mary. None of us can do what Mary did, but we can give and worship just as she did, if we have the courage and heart for it.

A feast was arranged for Jesus. No doubt His disciples were there and probably many who lived in Bethany. Lazarus was there and I suppose that the fact that he was alive again would have been central to the conversation. And yet Jesus knew that within 48 hours He Himself would be dead. One of the loneliest places is in a crowd. During the feast, in comes Mary with a flask of fragrant oil worth about a year's wages - say £20,000 in today's money. Some have suggested that this was her dowry and in her actions she was throwing away her hopes for marriage and her future social security. Breaking the flask, she anoints the whole of Jesus from head to toe, before using her hair as a towel to dry the feet of Jesus. Notice how she broke the flask, (Mark 14:3) rather than pouring it carefully. There was no going back now that the jar was broken. The temptation to save a little might have overpowered her had she just carefully removed the stopper and started to pour. I cannot imagine giving away a year's wages in one go - I think it would be too painful. But if ever God was to make such a call upon me, then Mary shows how it should be done - forthrightly with no turning back. But this was not just the giving of a whole lot of money. She gave herself! Imagine using your hair as a towel to dry the feet of someone else. How do you do that and retain any sense of dignity? Perhaps for months afterwards, her neighbours, maybe even her family, would have looked at her as if she had sprouted two heads! She would forever be in the "weird" gang. But she knew that Jesus was worth it, and she understood a little of what was really going on. As the crowd celebrated life as evidenced in Lazarus, she sided with Jesus and her actions must have spoken to His heart in encouragement. In just the same way that the flask was broken and the whole house was filled with its beautiful fragrance, so Jesus' life was to be broken on the cross, but then the whole world would receive the benefit. She would take the opportunity to be the first to bow the knee to Jesus, knowing that there will come a day when every knee will bow to Him.

It must have come as a real slap in the face to hear the voices raised against her complaining of the waste of what she had done. It is always likely that when we truly serve Him, we will receive little or no thanks, but a whole lot of criticism and misunderstanding. But let us note carefully what the Lord has to say to Mary. In Mark 14:8 He says, "*She has done what she could.*" There could be no higher commendation than that, but it is a commendation that is open to all. We will never have the opportunity to do what Mary did in exactly the same way, but we do all have the chance to do all that we can. Jesus does not expect us to do what we cannot do. Sometimes we take on the burden of false responsibility and become anxious as we see so much that needs to be done but remains undone. Let us never fall into that trap. But we do well to challenge ourselves as to whether or not we are doing all that we can. Jesus wants no less!

These two women had the opportunity to give lavishly. One had so little and yet gave everything. The other gave so much, and in so doing did what she could. We do not know what lies ahead of us each day but it would be a wonderful thing if we looked for the opportunities to worship God in the way that these two women did. He was worth all that they could give, and so they gave their all. Perhaps we keep quiet about our faith when we have the chance to speak up because we are worried what people will think of us. Let us remember Mary's hair and resolve to forgo our earthly reputation for His glory. Perhaps we are holding onto our various security blankets - things we feel we need to make life secure. Let us give them up as we remember the widow who gave away her all. Perhaps we are cautiously starting out on some task He has definitely called us to. Let us "burn our boats" and unreservedly give ourselves to following Jesus wherever He may lead. This is the way of faith that these two women teach us. Strikingly, neither has been forgotten. Certainly not by God, but in the unchanging and eternal Word of God what they have done will always be remembered. The last lesson they teach us is that we need never fear that we are going to give God too much and that it might not be valued rightly. I may well work too hard at work and the boss never notice or say thank you. I may do too much around the house that the family take for granted, and don't appreciate. Never so with God! From the

very smallest act to the greatest deed He knows all that is done for Him, and why it was done, even if it doesn't work out the way we intended, and it will always receive the commendation it deserves.

A tale of two men

But let us now move on to look at the lessons that we can learn from the two men in Mark 15 and see the opportunities they took to serve God.

“And Jesus cried out with a loud voice, and breathed His last. Then the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. So when the centurion, who stood opposite Him, saw that He cried out like this and breathed His last, he said, ‘Truly this Man was the Son of God!’ There were also women looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the Less and of Joses, and Salome, who also followed Him and ministered to Him when He was in Galilee, and many other women who came up with Him to Jerusalem. Now when evening had come, because it was the Preparation Day, that is, the day before the Sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent council member, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, coming and taking courage, went in to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Pilate marvelled that He was already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him if He had been dead for some time. So when he found out from the centurion, he granted the body to Joseph. Then he bought fine linen, took Him down, and wrapped Him in the linen. And he laid Him in a tomb which had been hewn out of the rock, and rolled a stone against the door of the tomb” (Mark 15:37-46).

The death of Jesus was like no other, and it clearly left its mark on the centurion on guard duty that day. He would have been well used to seeing death at close quarters, likely hardened to the sight and smell of suffering and death. But nothing had prepared him for the kind of death he was witnessing as he oversaw the crucifixion of Jesus. Normally the man being crucified would gradually weaken, often over a period of days, becoming incoherent as dehydration and shock gradually shut down his faculties. Eventually all would go quiet as any little remaining strength was consumed in the battle to breathe. I believe that Jesus was completely different. There was no gradual weakening. He remained as fully alive and strong throughout His hours on the cross, as He had been as He stilled the storm (Mark 5:34-41), or fed the thousands with the loaves and fishes (see John 6:1-15). Until the moment of His death, as Jesus cried out, *“Father, into Your hands I commend My spirit”*, (Luke 23:46) and with that He breathed His last. There was no dying battle, just a deliberate final breath, confirming what He had said, *“No man takes My life from Me. I have the power to lay it down, and I have the power to take it again”* (John 10:18). Jesus voluntarily stopped His life so that we might gain eternal life. The manner of His death obviously made an impression on the centurion as he declares, *“Truly this man was the Son of God!”* (Mark 15:39) What are we to make of his words? Some have suggested that this was said in mocking irony - *“If this was the best the Jewish god could do, well, so much for religion.”* Sadly there is no limit to the futile unbelief of the human heart. However, I think that the confession the centurion made was one of genuine wonder, or even whole hearted faith. This was death but not as he knew it. It was utterly supernatural. Soon Pilate summoned him to enquire if Jesus really was already dead and it was the manner of the centurion's report that led Pilate to grant the request of Joseph (Mark 15:43-45). If the centurion had reported that Jesus was indeed dead but in an unremarkable way, then in all likelihood Pilate would have instructed that He be buried in the common criminal grave, refusing Joseph's request. Perhaps the centurion conveyed something of the supernatural manner of the events he had witnessed and Pilate was keen to have the matter over with as quickly as possible.

We may not be gifted evangelists or public preachers but we can all give testimony to what we know about Jesus. We may not have all the answers to questions but we can say what God has done in our lives. There is real power in the words of an individual's testimony. It used to bother me that my testimony wasn't at all dramatic. I am utterly ordinary. And yet God has taken an utterly ordinary man and shown me extraordinary goodness in so many ways, and that is worth telling others about. We have no reason to be embarrassed or shy about what we believe because we know what God has done for us - we are eyewitnesses to our life's story. Let us then take any opportunity that comes along to speak up about Jesus. We don't need to preach the whole Gospel story every time, ready with answers to every hard question. The centurion offered no answer to why there is suffering, or what happens to the lost. He just said what he had seen and made the most of the opportunity to bear witness to the power of Jesus' death.

The second man we read about in Mark 15 was Joseph from Arimathea, possibly Ramah, a town in central Israel. He was a member of the ruling Jewish council but had been outvoted in the recent events that led to Jesus' death. Together with Nicodemus, he went to Pilate as soon as knew that Jesus was dead and requested that he be allowed to give the body of Jesus a proper burial. Jewish law meant that it would be wrong for Jesus' body to be left unburied over the Passover and so to start to decay, or for it to come into contact with another dead body, in a common grave. It could all have gone wrong for Joseph. Unstable Pilate might have taken his frustration at the events of the past 24 hours out on Joseph. Not only that, Joseph knew that his actions would spell disaster for his social standing with the other council members and in the wider community. Then there was the matter of the cost of the burial spices and having to decontaminate the tomb before it could be reused, or having to find another plot for the family grave. So many problems! Was it really worth all the hassle? Maybe he was guilt ridden - if only he had spoken up more at the

trial of Jesus, or even earlier before things had reached crisis point. No matter, now he would act decisively and do what he could for Jesus.

We ought never to let past regrets or missed opportunities stop us from doing the right thing now. We cannot change the past but we can change the present. We may not have been as faithful as we should have been in telling others about our faith, but we can take our courage, as Joseph did, and resolve that from today we will. Joseph could not undo what had happened but he could do this one thing of burying Jesus properly and so fulfilling the scriptures concerning His death (see Isaiah 53:9).

Perhaps, like me, there have been times when you have so wished that things were different and if only they had been, then it would have been possible to serve Jesus. Well, Joseph surely wished things were different but in the circumstances where God had put him, he served in the way that was still open to him, and like Mary, "*did what [he] could*" (Mark 14:8).

There will always be opportunities for us to serve God in word and action. May we have the insight to recognise them and the courage to act when they arise!

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