The Last Supper
Mark 14:1-26

If you're not yet a Christian but are considering the Christian faith, there are two key questions you've got to answer. But they're the same two questions you've got to answer if you're already a Christian and you want to live the Christian life with purpose and joy. And those questions are - why should you trust Christ with your life? And why should you serve him with your life?

And the passage we're looking at today answers both. And we're into the last two days of Jesus' earthly life. And it's happening at a key moment in the Jewish calendar. Look at v1, 'It was now two days before the Passover.'

Now, when it's your birthday, maybe you have friends round for a meal. When you get married you invite the guests to a dinner. A head of state visits and the hosts put on a banquet. Even today feasts matter.

But for Israel, the feast of Passover was special. It could only be celebrated within the walls of Jerusalem, and so pilgrims flocked in, and the city's population would swell from around 30,000 to 5-600,000.

Imagine the nightmare that would be to police. It would be like a large town, double the size of Morges, facing an influx of every inhabitant of Geneva, Lausanne and Zurich, to party for a week, with no-where to stay.

But the Roman occupying authorities would have been nervous for another reason. It's what Passover celebrated: Israel's deliverance from slavery and the oppressive rule of Egypt, *and* the hope that God would do it again. It was like an annual time bomb waiting to go off.

It would be like every single French speaker in Switzerland, descending on Lausanne for an annual celebration of being liberated from the power of the German speakers, but for that to happen at a time when they're occupied and oppressed by… Germans.

And that's why Mark tells us that the religious leaders, wanted to arrest and execute Jesus, v1, 'By stealth' and not, v2, "during the feast, lest there be an uproar from the people."

But if you notice, v2 and v10 fit seamlessly together. In v1 the leaders are looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and in v10, 'Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them.'

But Mark doesn't them seamlessly together. Instead, he gives us another of his sandwiches. And between the desire of the leaders to arrest Jesus, and Judas offering to show them how, Mark inserts the account of the woman anointing Jesus. And he does it for a reason.

A Contrast of Hearts
Now, every week Andrew Parris helps me lead the student/young adult group. But there's frequently more than one Andrew in the group, so Andrew Parris is Old Andrew.

Look at v3, ‘And while he [Jesus] was at Bethany in the house of Simon *the leper*.’ Why label him like that? Isn’t that rather stigmatising? No. It’s because Simon was the most common Jewish name at the time, so to tell all the Simons apart you called them *Simon the Pharisee*, or *Simon who is called Peter*, or *Simon the Leper*. Now, why point that out? Because Mark’s writing this to the Christians in Rome, and in Rome if you made a list of the 100 most popular names, Simon would be way down the bottom. So this isn’t a story Mark’s made up. This tells you Simon was a real person, and Jesus went to his house for dinner.

And while he’s there, v3, ‘A woman came with an alabaster jar of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head.’

And when Mark says it was very costly, he’s not exaggerating. Those present estimated it’s worth 300 denarii - a year’s salary for the average working man. But this woman’s not a working man, she’s a woman and would have no access to that kind of money. Which means this is likely a treasured family possession. So its value to her is not just financial.

And yet, she doesn’t just pour out a few drops, or even a handful, and keep the rest. Mark tells us she breaks the flask. She pours it all out on Jesus. She holds nothing back.

Does she remind you of anyone? Like the poor widow putting in her two small copper coins. Because the monetary value of these two gifts are polar opposites - but both are sacrificial. And Mark inserts this here for a reason: to contrast her sacrificial devotion, giving the most valuable thing she has, to Judas and the priests.

You see, look how the room responds. Verse 4, ‘There were some who said to themselves indignantly, “Why was the ointment wasted like that?” And while Mark doesn’t tell us specifically who it was, Matthew, who was there, does: it was the disciples - no doubt including himself. And John tells us where the grumbling began: with Judas Iscariot.

And the complaint, v5, is that “This ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor.” But as John tells us, Judas didn’t say this because he cared about the poor, but because he kept the money bag and this money could have come his way.

But think of the implication of what they’re saying. They see this money being spent on Jesus and they’re effectively saying, ‘he’s not worth it’. Whereas the woman thinks he is worth every penny. Ask yourself, who would you have sided with?

You see, Mark tells us that the others, v5, ‘scolded her.’ But Jesus comes to her defence: v6, “Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you want, you can do good for them. But you will not always have me.” So where these disciples see waste - Jesus sees beauty. Which means that whether it’s virtually worthless copper coins, or a possession of great worth, no gift however great or small is ever wasted on Jesus.

And yet, look at what Jesus says: *they can help the poor anytime they want.* In other words, don’t use the poverty of others, and the vast needs that exist, as a cover for covetousness - as an excuse to hold on.

But he's saying something else as well. He's saying that he is above the needs of the poor. Think about that. If I were to say to you, I am more important than all the poor, spend your money on me, you'd say 'you're deluded.' And yet, here is Jesus saying that he is more important than the second most important commandment: to love your neighbour as yourself.

But what's more important than that? The first commandment, to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. And here is a woman doing just that.
Now, to be clear, does this mean we shouldn't care about social justice and relieving poverty? Absolutely not. One reason the early church spread like wild fire is that it cared for those no one else cared for. But, it does mean that it's Christ who has our ultimate allegiance - and not political action, on the left or the right.

Ok, but why does she do it? What does she see in Jesus that the others are missing? Well, Jesus tells us, v8, "She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burial." And we've repeatedly seen the disciples struggling to understand Jesus when he's talked of his approaching death, because they're thinking 'political, military victory, that's what he's come for'. But the woman *has* understood, so she does what she can ahead of time. She loves and loves sacrificially, prepares him for burial.

And Jesus says, v9, "Truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her." Now, have you thought yet what you want written on your gravestone? Or what people might say about you at your funeral? Or hope they'll say?

Whatever it is, it'll be about you. About the person who's died. But here, Jesus is saying he's going to die, but the memorial will be about her - because he will need no memorial, because there will be no grave for a gravestone. But

But it's also because she's understood what's at the heart of the gospel. That the good news is not 'your best life now'. And it's not 'fight poverty and then God will accept you'. Anymore than it's 'your greatest enemy is the Left, so fight them'. At the heart of the gospel is that Christ died for our sins. And so every time the gospel is proclaimed it's a reminder that this woman had it right.

But maybe it's the realisation that Jesus is serious about dying that's the final straw for Judas. Verses 10-11: 'Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. And when they heard it, they were glad and promised to give him money.'

Money has a grip on his heart, but combine that with Jesus not being the messiah he wants him to be, and it is a deadly combination.

You see, Mark tells us he 'was one of the twelve'. He'd spent three years up close and personal with Jesus, but now he walks away. Because you can know lots about Jesus. You can even have had lots of religious experiences, but Christ still not have your heart.

And that's the contrast, between a woman who loves at great cost, and a man who walks away, that Mark wants you to see.

Think how Mark's first readers would have seen it. They're in Rome and beginning to feel the pressure of being followers of Christ. If they continue to refuse to worship in the temples it won't just be friends they'll lose, but their jobs and within a couple of years, their lives. Or think of yourself, and the desire to earn more and have more, *or* the realisation that life isn't turning out the way you wanted. What do you do? Do you go for the money and let that have your heart? Do you look at the way God isn't giving you the life you wanted and your heart grow cold? Or do you look at this woman, and the beauty of her act, and know that however much people might say you are wasting your life, or however broken you feel, you know that Christ is worth it?

Well, two things here tell you why he is. You see, up until now it's been Jesus driving the action. But from here on, as Judas walks away, it begins to look like Jesus is at the mercy of events, of events driven by others. What Mark wants you to see is that is a million miles from the truth.

The Sovereignty of God

Look at v11. Judas comes to the leaders and Mark tells us they 'were glad'! Because his coming means their plans to be rid of Jesus are beginning to fall into place. When, in reality, God is using them to establish Christ's kingdom - the One they want to be rid of.

Verse 12, 'On the first day of unleavened Bread, when they sacrificed the Passover lamb…' And they counted their days from sunset to sunset, and it's Thursday. Everyone else will eat Passover on Friday night, but Jesus tells two of his disciples to organise theirs a day early. Because on Friday afternoon, as the Passover lambs are being sacrificed in the temple, Jesus will be be dying on the cross.

And the disciples prepare the place and, v17-18, 'When it was evening, he came with the twelve. And as they were reclining at table and eating, Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me."'

Now, in our culture you can sit and eat with someone and it not carry much weight. In Jesus' culture, to eat with someone was full of meaning. It was a sign that you were friends, that you approved of those sat with you, that you trusted them. It's why the religious leaders saw who Jesus ate with and said bitterly, 'he's a friend of tax collectors and sinners'.

And so Jesus being betrayed is bad enough, but to be betrayed by 'one who is eating with me' is a double betrayal. It's like being stabbed in the back. It's why commentators hear an echo of Psalm 41:9, '*Even my close friend, in whom I trusted, who ate my bread*, has lifted his heel against me.'

And yet, Mark wants you to see that none of this is a surprise to Jesus. The disciples are sorrowful, asking, v19, "Is it I?" And Jesus simply repeats, "It is one of the twelve."

Now, he knows it's Judas, so why not be more specific than that? Because by dawn they will *all* have abandoned him. Judas will betray him for money and maybe disillusionment, everyone else will abandon him for fear, or moral cowardice.

Yet, none of it surprises Jesus, v21, "For the Son of Man goes *as it is written of him.*" He knows that God is working through his enemies to see his promises come true. Except, the one place in the Old Testament we see the Son of Man spoken of is Daniel 7. And there, the Son of Man isn't betrayed,

he comes to God, the Ancient of Days, and is given a kingdom that will never end. Nowhere do we hear talk of the Son of Man suffering.

Instead, Jesus is taking all the Old Testament promises that speak of one who *will* suffer and fusing them with that of the Son of Man coming as the ultimate king. Promises like Genesis 3 and the seed of woman that will bruise the serpent's head, but in the process will himself be bruised. Or Isaiah 53 and the Servant of the Lord, who will be crushed, bearing the iniquity of many, but in the process make many righteous. Or Daniel 9 and the anointed one who will be cut off, but in the process make a strong covenant with many. Or Zechariah 13 and the one who is struck and yet is *the* shepherd of God's sheep.

In other words, yes, Judas will betray him, and the authorities kill him, but God is using their evil actions to bring about his wonderful purposes. And they might think that events are now moving in their direction but, over it all, and through it all, God is working out his plan to save his people and glorify his Son.

But that doesn't mean Judas isn't responsible for his actions - like he's a puppet on a string. Jesus makes it clear he is absolutely morally responsible. We all are. What it does mean is that God doesn't simply work for good *despite* the actions of others, but through them.

So think what that means for your life. Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers and ended up falsely accused of rape and languished for years in jail. Yet he could look back and say to them, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Gen 50:20). And not just for his life, he says, but the saving of many other lives.

And so you can look at Jesus being betrayed and then crucified, the greatest of all evils, and know that what others meant for evil God meant for your good. And as Paul says in Romans 8, 'If God is for us, who can be against us' (Rom 8:31). Which means that however bad life looks - whether that's your health, or your work, or how others are treating you, you can know God will work this for your good. Secularism and the self-help gurus tell you, you have your future in your hands, so make of your life whatever you want. Christianity tells you something far better - your life, and every life, is in God's hands.

And there's a reason you can trust those hands. And it's the second reason why Jesus is worth your acts of costly love.

The Giving of Christ

Look at v22, 'As they were eating, he took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body."

And this is happening in the course of a meal that remembers how God redeemed Israel from slavery in Egypt. How they had taken the blood of a lamb and painted it over their doorframes, and how that night the angel of the Lord had passed over, and the firstborn of Egypt had died, but the firstborn of Israel had been saved, because a lamb had died in their place.

And here is Jesus, the firstborn Son of God breaking bread and saying, take, this is my body. I'm the ultimate Passover lamb who gives his life to save yours and to set you free.

And the meal was shaped around 4 cups of wine. And Jesus takes the 3rd cup, the cup of blessing, and passes it round for them to drink. And then he says, v24, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many." And the blood of the covenant was the blood of a sacrificial animal Moses sprinkled over the people of Israel at Sinai, as the mark that they were now God's people, bound in covenant with him. But through the prophet Jeremiah, God had promised 'Behold, the days are coming, when I will make a new covenant…' (Jer 31:31).

And Jesus is saying '*that* new covenant is sealed with my blood.'

So it's not just the woman who stands in such stark contrast to Judas, it's Jesus himself. She gives the most valuable thing she has. Jesus gives the thing of greatest value in the universe - his life, for us. Judas sells Jesus for his own gain; Jesus gives himself for our eternal gain.

Gregory of Nazianzus, one of the church fathers, said, 'Christ is sold and cheap was the price… yet he buys back the world at mighty cost.' In other words, Christ was sold for so small a price. Yet he buys us back - and how great the price!

And that's why you can trust him with your life. And it's why he's worth every costly act of love. As Paul writes in Romans 8, 'He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things.' (Rom 8:32)

You see, think who's sat around the table with Jesus. It's not the table of the loyal, is it? Each of them will either betray him or abandon him. But that's exactly who Jesus dies for - for them and us. It's a table of grace. And he will never abandon you.

But you've got to come and take from him. 'Take' he says, 'this is my body.' You have to come by faith and receive from him.

But notice, Jesus doesn't say 'just *think* hard about my sacrifice.' He tells us to come and take and eat, and drink. Why? Why make it physical? Well, why do you eat and drink at all? For strength, for energy, for pleasure. And as we come to his table, we feed on him and allow him to strengthen us spiritually. And we taste and see that the Lord is good.

And as we do, you can know Christ has done everything you need to secure your forgiveness and your eternal safety in the hands of God your heavenly father.

You see, look what Jesus says after passing the cup: v25, "Truly, I say to you, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God." Why say that? Because it's the 3rd Passover cup, and there's a fourth to come - the Cup of Consummation, the cup that ends the feast with the promise that one day God will put everything right and triumph over all our enemies. But Jesus doesn't drink that cup. Why not?

Well, later on this night, as he is in the Garden of Gethsemane he knows God the Father is offering him the cup and he trembles to take it. And just before they crucify him, they offer him wine to drink, but he refuses. But then, as he hangs on the cross, right before he dies, he cries out, "I thirst!" and they offer him sour wine, and this time he does drink it. He drinks the wine he says he will not drink. And then cries out: "It is finished!"

What's finished? The Passover meal is finished. His sacrifice for you and for me is finished. He has delivered us from slavery to sin and death. And he can drink the fourth and final cup because he has thrown open the doors of his kingdom. And he invites us to come. And he rules and reigns waiting for that day when he returns and we sit with him in the greatest feast ever.

So you can trust him, and you can give him your life in acts of sacrificial love.