

The Anointing at Bethany



The Anointing of Christ - The Magdalen - by Greg Ticker

The artist takes his cue from the incident of the anointing as described in the Gospel of John. There it takes place in the house of Martha, Mary and their restored to life brother Lazarus. He also accepts the idea that this beautiful and profoundly meaningful ritual was performed by Mary Magdalen, of whom more later. Unlike John's account in the anointing was of Jesus' feet; this picture reflects the description in Matthew and Mark, namely that the oil was poured on Jesus's head. In other words, it is administered as it would be for a monarch or a priest; and it is of course entirely fitting for Christ, our Priest, Prophet and King.ⁱ

But the version of the story we are going to read comes from the Gospel of Matthew and although it is in Bethany, it takes place at the house of Simon the leper. Many details are similar but Mathew ends his version with a seemingly innocuous line from Jesus. However, we might decide to find great significance in the words spoken by Jesus of the woman who has performed this act of devotion:

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Now while Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, and she poured it on his head as he sat at the table. But when the disciples saw it, they were angry and said, 'Why this waste? For this ointment could have been sold for a large sum, and the money given to the poor.' But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, 'Why do you trouble the woman? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial. **Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.**' Matthew 26: 6-13

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Reflection

Now we are pushing the envelope somewhat here so if you prefer to give this a pass then that is perfectly understandable.

Just to explain a little more. The YouTube video you are being invited to watch shortly is a performance by Melanie C (Yes, a Spice Girl makes it into an informal Holy Week reflection). She is singing a song made famous by Yvonne Ellerman who recorded it for the soundtrack of Jesus Christ Superstar. The 1970's Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber musical loosely based around the life of Jesus. They go with the commonly held surmise (trope or meme) that Mary Magdalen was the woman freed from seven demons and that these represented a life as a sex worker.

The fact of the matter is that there is no evidence in the gospels for this. It's a putting together of different strands. It could be true, partially true, or not true

at all. If Mary Magdalen was sent for trial in a Scottish court accused of prostitution based on the evidence in the gospels the verdict would have to be not proven.”

But putting all that aside or partially. It is unquestionably a love song, and when sung well it conveys the ambivalence of the character’s intentions towards Jesus. There is natural attraction mixed with desire. There is an unconvincing and affectedly casual dismissal of Jesus as “only a man”; but the character as portrayed in the musical clearly does have feelings for Jesus.

What is interesting is the way in which as the song progresses Mary is struggling with the fact that the love she feels is unlike any other she has experienced. Perhaps here she represents those, mostly but not exclusively women, whose only experience of intimacy has been frivolous, abusive or transactional.

Even if the love is purely human it is still on a higher plane than previously. But the ambivalence runs deeper; it’s as if she recognises that there is something so unique about this man that any sexual feelings she has, as real as they might be are not appropriate to the kind of relationship she is being summoned to experience with Jesus.

And so she discovers that her love is being transformed by the sheer goodness of Jesus. Could it be that the real Mary Magdalen came to the same conclusion which is why she was ultimately, aside from his Mother, the one whose love for Jesus was rewarded with a foretaste of the Resurrection. And of course, she also received the privilege of being the first *Apostolos*, sent one; with the commission to proclaim his resurrection to the other disciples. If this is true, then no one has a greater motive than Mary Magdalen to anoint Jesus as the Christ (Anointed One).

Bearing all this in mind, I you are ready then here is the YouTube link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8azdnR2fQus>

I will give what I have

From a high, secret shelf, I take what I hid myself –
Perfume, precious and rare, never meant to spill or spare.
This I'll carefully break; this I'll empty for his sake:
I will give what I have to my Lord.

Though the action is crude, it will show my gratitude
For the truth that I've learnt from the one who's heaven-sent;
For this life once a mess which his beauty can express,
I will give what I have to my Lord.

With his critics around, common gossip will abound.
They'll note all that they see to discredit him and me.
Let them smirk, let them jeer, say what people want to hear;
I will give what I have to my Lord.

It's because he'll receive, that the likes of me believe
God has time for the poor. He has shown us heaven's door.
Be it perfume and care, be it anger or despair,
I will give what I have to my Lord.

O Christ,
Anointed One.
You allowed yourself to be ministered to by Mary,
Just as your own Mother ministered to you all through your life.
As we recall her actions in the days approaching your Passion and death,
Enable us to cherish the hope that we too will receive opportunities
To minister love and care to you in the least of your sisters and brothers.
For you are the one who claims them as our own,
You the one who commissions and sends us
Not for our own gratification
But that we might discover in meeting the needs of others
The joy of the Resurrection.
You who live and reign for ever and ever.

ⁱ See *The Christ Journey* – Sister Wendy Beckett reflects on the Art of Greg Tricker, Saint Paul's Publishing, London, 2011, pp.62-66.