

main course

encounters in Mark's Gospel – twelve

Jesus and a shameless woman – Mk 14.3-9

This is one of a number of '**encounters in Mark's Gospel**' each of which enables a small-group conversation around a particular story in Mark's Gospel. These conversations aim to help you, and everyone else in your group, to:

- build up your **confidence** in actively exploring bits of the Bible
- **make connections** between the biblical story and your own life story
- find fresh **vision** for the business of being human today

all from watching and talking freely with each other about encounters between Jesus and those he meets – as we find them recorded in Mark's Gospel.

INTRODUCTION

This twelfth **encounter in Mark's Gospel** is all too easily woven together with the rather diverse accounts in other Gospels. There's another Study on the Vision4Life website that deliberately and helpfully explores this diversity.

<http://www.vision4life.org.uk/index.php/bible-year/main-courses/3-remembering-him-jesus-story/>

Here, you are invited to concentrate on the scene as Mark tells it and see what you can see in this version, in the context of Mark's whole story.

STRUCTURE

Each of your **encounters in Mark's Gospel** will follow the same basic structure:

1. Assembling and beginning
2. Sharing the story of the encounter
3. Our initial reactions - sharing our own first responses
4. Extra Insights 1 – learning from Mark's big story
5. Extra Insights 2 – learning about Jesus' world
6. Exploring the Encounter Triangle
 - What do we think was learned from encountering Jesus?
 - What do we think Jesus learned from the encounter?
 - What have we learned from watching the encounter?
7. Deciding how that helps us to live now
8. (optional) Rounding it off with a song

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1. ASSEMBLING and BEGINNING

The group needs to gather, settle in and prepare for a shared conversation. This may or may not include prayer or worship or some catering option, depending on your local circumstances and context.

2. SHARING THE STORY

The conversation is started by hearing or sharing the story that will form its focus – the story told in **Mark 14.3-9**. This might be done in one of the following ways:

- Someone reads **Mark 14.3-9** straight from their Bible
- The group re-constructs the story of **Mark 14.3-9** from various rememberings
- The story of **Mark 14.3-9** is told by someone who has prepared it for telling
- A locally-devised combination of some of the above

Mark 14.3-9 is one of those stories that occurs in significantly different (but overlapping) forms in Matthew's Gospel and Luke's Gospel as well as in Mark, so if your group uses a remembering and re-telling approach you are going to have to decide how closely you all want to keep to Mark's particular telling.

3. OUR INITIAL REACTIONS

The group should then consider the question:

- **"What is this story about?"**

This can be done with a brief time of discussion in twos and threes followed by reporting to the whole group, or done as a whole group conversation – as group size and local practice allow. Let's be clear, there's no 'right' answer to this question – it's simply an assembling of ways in which hearing the story has struck group members and their memories of how they have learned its 'meaning' from past encounters and received teaching.

4. EXTRA INSIGHTS part one – learning from Mark's big story

Share the information about how Mark has used this story and where he's placed it in his big story that's given in the EXTRA INSIGHTS on **page 6** at the end of these notes

5. EXTRA INSIGHTS part two – learning about Jesus' world

Share the information about the social, political and religious world in which Jesus lived that's given in the EXTRA INSIGHTS on **page 7** at the end of these notes

6. EXPLORING THE ENCOUNTER TRIANGLE

The group takes time to explore the story (in the light of their initial ideas and the Extra Insights that they've shared), standing, in turn, at each corner of the triangle:

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Standing and looking at the story from the perspective of the anointing woman, consider:

- **What do we think this woman learned in her encounter with Jesus?**
 - *teasing this out ... What might this woman have been hoping to achieve? What did she learn from Jesus' response? Where did that leave her?*

Standing and looking at the story from Jesus' perspective, consider:

- **What do we think Jesus learned from his encounter with this woman?**
 - *teasing this out ... Try to imagine the ideas and emotions that this woman's active intervention might have stirred up for Jesus? This woman focuses her attention on Jesus, his feelings, his purposes, his fate – how does he cope with that? What do you think he came away thinking she had done for him? Did it make a difference?*

Standing where we stand, watching the whole encounter, consider:

- **What have we learned from watching these proceedings?**
 - *teasing this out ... What previous understandings of this story did we bring? What have we found in the story this time? What about this story connects with our own stories? What do we take away from watching this encounter together, especially Jesus' words describing those who would hear this story long afterwards?*

7. HOW DOES THAT HELP US TO LIVE NOW?

Now your group needs to bring it all home. Working as a group, consider two questions:

- **In what ways does this story speak to us today?**

Be imaginative. Be playful. Be daring. Be incredibly serious. Try ideas. Disagree. Come to a consensus. Work with the story like you're squeezing oranges. What good ideas to help us with living now can the group find from what you have watched?

- **What are we going to do differently now?**

Be practical. Be realistic. But be prepared to face the risks and challenges the story raises. Honestly address what the story seems to be saying to you and your situation as individuals, but also as a group, in your church and in your local community.

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8. ROUNDING IT OFF WITH A SONG (optional)

SHE DID WHAT SHE COULD Mark 14:3-9 tune: *The Ash Grove* (Welsh, traditional)

1. She came with a token
- yet nothing was spoken -
her ointment jar broken
to do what she would.
Sweet perfume of caring
on Jesus' head sharing,
for his death preparing,
she did what she could.

Chorus:

**Praise God for her vision,
despite the derision,
her mighty decision
to do what she could.
may her act inspire us,
her confidence fire us,
when others require us
to change things for good!**

2. The others at table
were none of them able
to see her as stable,
but both mad and rude.
Quite blind to the woman,
not seeing her human
they laughed at this no-one
who "did what she could".

3. Yet Jesus found power
to face his dark hour
in love she let flower,
so he understood
the worth beyond measure
of this simple treasure
that gives God true pleasure -
she did what she could!

John M. Campbell

This song was written for a friend who was the minister on a large housing estate on the edge of Glasgow. I remember him standing with me on a grey morning looking out across the estate towards a series of grey tower blocks where he said there were pressured people and real suffering on just about every floor, I asked which Bible character he would consider as a role model for him and his ministry.

He said it would have to be this nameless woman who anointed Jesus. For on the estate he was surrounded in vast amounts of human suffering that he could never cure – just as this woman couldn't do anything to prevent Jesus' death. But this woman and her story gave him some sort of survival hope, because she didn't give up and Jesus was clearly delighted in the fact that "She did what she could".

Because of her, my friend knew he didn't have to sort the whole estate and every problem on it but it was still worth committing to the place and trying to contribute something. What God wanted him to do was to 'do what he could'. I thought there must be others doing their best under pressure who needed to remember that too – hence this song. (John C.)

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EVALUATION

Please try to answer these questions for yourself and for others who will use this material:

1. What was the most helpful thing?
2. What was the least helpful thing?
3. What would you like to try now?

THE NEXT STEP

This is one of a number of **encounters in Mark's Gospel** that are being offered through the Vision4Life website. Between them these conversation materials explore a whole range of different encounters that Jesus has in the course of the Gospel story. If your group found this one helpful they may wish to try some of the others.

*Full acknowledgement for the ideas and information that have helped us to construct these materials is given in the **Introduction to the 'encounters in Mark's Gospel'** programme on the Vision4Life website.*

www.vision4life.org.uk

see the following two pages for the "Extra Insights" materials for this conversation...

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EXTRA INSIGHTS

part one – learning from Mark's big story

What can we learn from the stories Mark places both before and after our story and from the way our story works in the whole-Gospel storyline?:

The bit before our bit (Mk 14.1-2)

- **The net of intrigue is tightening around Jesus** – the chief priests and scribes are preparing to snuff out this annoying upstart Galilean who threatens their honour, their status and the system that supports them. All the usual elite ploys of public power and secret stealth are considered. The thing must be done cleanly and without the risk of public outcry. This would best meet the self-serving needs of the Jerusalem elite. Morality, godliness and respect for truth or justice do not seem to be factors in this at all. These are the cruel political realities relentlessly encircling Jesus. Yet, over the hill in Bethany, a woman wants to do something entirely different for Jesus.

The bit after our bit (Mk 14.10-11)

- **The plot quickens** – we are plunged, once again, back into the ugly world of politics and elite intrigue, only this time there is, for the elite, a hugely helpful breakthrough – an insider in the Jesus group is volunteering to betray his leader. This allows the chief priest to move far faster against Jesus without an obvious public arrest – a useful convenience that should speed things up – no more than that. Yet, for Judas (about whose motives we hear nothing) this is a colossal act of repudiation, rejecting the one to whom he has previously committed everything he is and has. Contrast what we hear of Judas with the motives, perceptions and actions of the woman in our story.

Our story in the flow of Mark's whole-Gospel story

There are many encounters in Mark's Gospel where Jesus sees and responds to the humanity and needs of someone whom others have simply ignored or deliberately disregarded. Here, at the start of the final headlong rush through intrigue, betrayal, desertion, dubious judicial proceedings and public denunciations to a death as a reviled outlaw, here is a story of one solitary person seeing and feeling something of Jesus' own painful plight and trying to do something extravagant, something beautiful, to show they care. Before this and after this we see the extravagance and beauty of Jesus caring for others, but this time we watch as he receives; a nameless woman offers him the gifts of recognition, care and concern. The next time anyone tries to do this much to show care for him it will be far too late – women will turn up with spices to show respect to his dead body.

In the whole of this Gospel, this story is special, and, with his customary dramatic tautness, Mark has tightly surrounded it with brief accounts of threatened people desperately seeking to resist and destroy Jesus. The contrast is startling. For the Gospel to be Gospel it must result in extravagant response – like this woman's story.

EXTRA INSIGHTS

part two – learning about Jesus' world

Rural dining – We retreat over the hill from the confrontations and plotting of Jerusalem and its temple to the small satellite village of Bethany. Jesus is dining in the house of 'Simon the Leper'. Whilst we know a lot about the dining habits of rich Romans, it's harder to reconstruct the social world of this dinner in Bethany. Still, the village setting, as opposed to an upper class Jerusalem home, and the description of the host as 'the Leper' (was he once a leper or is he still a leper? - we are offered no account of a healing) surely suggest that this is not in any sense an elite dining experience – Jesus is still an outsider eating with outsiders.

Indecent intrusion – Yet even in this setting the intrusion of an un-named (and possibly unknown) woman into the middle of the meal to anoint Jesus with costly burial perfumes seems to be shocking – possibly, it is more starkly shocking to these diners because their own meagre income makes them acutely aware of the vast extravagance of the act (the perfume cost the better part of a year's income for a labourer). In various ways, this woman is challenging the boundaries of acceptable behaviour.

A significant special anointing? – In truly grand social circles each dinner guest would be anointed with perfume, but this does not seem to be the case here. Only Jesus is anointed. Also, this is a hugely expensive single-use jar of anointing oil and Jesus himself interprets the act as preparing him for his burial. Some (such as Susan Miller in *Women in Mark's Gospel*) also invite us to read this anointing as an echo of the ancient Israelite tradition of anointing kings. Remember that 'Messiah' or 'Christ' means 'anointed one'. Is this, then, an 'alternative' anointing of God's chosen one carried out by an unknown woman who interrupts the meal in a leper's house in a village, rather than an 'official' anointing by the chief priest at some grand event held in the Jerusalem Temple? That edginess would fit with the alternative 'coronation' nailed to a cross between two thieves at Golgotha, where Jesus is publicly proclaimed (in three languages) to be 'The King of the Judeans'. For Mark, these absurd outcast events represent the true site of God's favour. Indeed it will be the vast and grand Temple, with its priests and scholars and their comfortable life in Jerusalem, which will be entirely swept away. Instead, this officially excluded and reviled Galilean will be seen to be the true heart of what God is about. But, for now, only this one nameless woman seems to have enough imagination to offer an aching moment of extravagance. She alone approaches Jesus not to betray him, nor for personal healing or rescue, but to offer him a moment of understanding and respect, and in an act which simultaneously acknowledges his impending rejection and death.

Why no name? – Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza has famously argued (in *In Memory of Her*) that naming the male host whilst not naming the principal female protagonist in this story is a classic example of the paternalistic male bias of the biblical texts. Yet Susan Miller suggests that, at least in this case, leaving this woman un-named, with no prior history, no recorded utterance and no subsequent story, focuses attention exclusively on her **actions**, what she does as a response to Jesus. That leaves her as the key Gospel example of true discipleship, as an example for us all. Her story invites our story.