**THE WAY EVERLASTING: SERMONS BY JAMES DENNEY**

**23. A GOOD WORK by JAMES DENNEY**

*"And being in Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as He sat at meat, there came a woman having an alabaster box of ointment of spikenard very precious; and she brake the box, and poured it on His head?"*

*Mark 14:3*

The story of the anointing at Bethany, an incident which deeply moved Jesus and which shines out with a radiance of its own even on the pages of the Gospel, is set by the evangelist in a very sombre frame. In itself the outburst of a great devotion to Jesus, it is preceded by an account of the malignity of His enemies, and followed by that of the treachery of one of His friends. The chief priests and the scribes, we are told at the beginning of the chapter, sought how they might take Him by craft and put Him to death. The one thing which embarrassed them was the presence in Jerusalem of the Galilean admirers of Jesus; if any violence were attempted there might be a popular rising in His favour. From this embarrassment they were delivered by Judas. The assistance of one of the twelve enabled them to act with speed and secrecy; perhaps they thought it would also do something to discredit Jesus with the multitude, when His own followers turned against Him. It is apparent from the fourth Gospel that the promptitude with which Judas acted was not unconnected with the incident at Bethany: Judas was prominent among those who misread the act of Mary, and exposed themselves to the Lord's rebuke. But I do not propose to discuss either his character in general or his immediate motive in betraying Jesus. I cannot overcome the feeling that there is something morally unwholesome and in sincere in all speculative discussions of this sort. They are exercises of moral ingenuity upon a subject which is exhibited in Scripture to excite moral horror. They are attempts to revise a sentence from which there is no appeal: "Good were it for that man if he had never been born". The interest of the references to Judas here is only that his conduct serves as a foil to that of Mary.

It was in the circumstances just described, while the net of His enemies was swiftly closing in upon Him, that Jesus was entertained at Bethany by a circle of His friends. It is not easy to say how far they appreciated the circumstances, or had any definite idea of what was impending. On the way to Jerusalem He had repeatedly spoken of His death, but if there were those among His disciples who had an uneasy sense of something ominous in the air, there were those also who thought that the kingdom of God should immediately appear. To all intents and purposes Jesus was alone. He sat among His friends, but His mind was absorbed in thoughts which most of them did not divine. This is one of the trials of life which has in its measure to be borne by all. We have to live, to take our part in bright scenes, to see smiling faces and listen to cheerful voices, while our hearts are sad with in us, and death unseen by others is at our door. We may be sure that no shadow was cast on the company by the preoccupation of Jesus with what was about to befall Him; He would bear His own burden and not obtrude His anxiety on others. But there must have been a certain tension of feeling in the company; and its pressure in one heart was relieved by the act described in the text. "There came a woman having an alabaster box of ointment of spikenard very precious; and she brake the box, and poured it on His head." Anointing is not a Western custom, and the use of such perfumes is rather counted unmanly among us, but in the East it was otherwise. In the hot and stifling climate it was grateful and refreshing, and to anoint one's guests was an ordinary courtesy the neglect of which was noticed and felt by Jesus. But this was no ordinary anointing. It was distinguished by the costliness of the perfume, and by the lavish generosity with which it was poured out. Not a word was said; the act itself said all that was necessary to those who were worthy to understand it. An ancient Greek poet describes his poems as "having a voice for the intelligent," and this woman's act has the character of a poem. It has "the loveliness of perfect deeds, more strong than all poetic thought". In some way it must have come from a sense of debt to Jesus. Mary owed to the Lord what she could never repay. She had sat at His feet and heard His word. She had received her brother again from the dead; she had herself received the life eternal. She had a finer sense than others that Jesus could not be with them long, and she must do something to give expression to her feelings. The ointment was nothing; she was pouring out her heart at Jesus' feet.

The Gospel narratives, in showing how the act of Mary was understood and misunderstood by those who witnessed it, invite us to consider the principles on which actions can be or ought to be judged.

**1.** The standard which first occurs to everyone is that of duty or law. The right action is one that is enjoined upon us by the law, one which an external rule makes obligatory, and which we dare not neglect. It is obvious that this is a standard of which we can here make no use at all. There was no law which required Mary to act as she did, and no one could say that a law had been broken or that duty had been neglected even though the anointing at Bethany had never taken place.

**2.** But there is another standard by which we may judge of actions - not the standard of duty, but that of utility. We may think not of what it is obligatory upon us to do, but of what it is sensible, reasonable, profitable for us to do. This was the standard which was applied by some of those who were present on the occasion, and particularly by Judas. To them the anointing was waste. It was the more reprehensible because there were so many better things which might have been done at the same cost. "It might have been sold for more than three hundred pence and given to the poor." We all feel that this utilitarian estimate of Mary's action is, to say the least, unsympathetic: it is no use asking what is the good of such and such an action if the actor is quite indifferent about the good of it in your sense of the term. You cannot convict him of any wrong by showing that there is no profit in what he has done, unless he did it for such profit, or unless such profit is the only legitimate end of action. What the disciples did when they exclaimed, why was this waste of the ointment made? was really to interpret through the senses an action which proceeded from the soul, and could only disclose its meaning to the soul. Perhaps they were ashamed the moment the word "waste" had passed their lips, and tried to cover their confusion by the suggestion that it might have been given to the poor: this is no unusual experience. Anyhow we must remember they were poor men, and that to squander in one impulsive instant, for no visible object, a whole year's wages of a working man, might well put them out of their reckoning for the moment. But we must take care also not to share their mistake. To waste, in the proper sense of the term, no one could be more opposed than Jesus. It is He who says, "Gather up the fragments that remain that nothing be lost". But generosity is not waste. The affections need to be nourished, and they are only nourished by the kind of giving which looks for no return. They need to be nourished even in the interest of the poor, and it is no genuine care for the poor which would check their spontaneous, impulsive, even exuberant action. The hope of the poor lies in the kindness and generosity of human hearts, and kindness and generosity are fostered not by considerations of what is sensible, but by kind and generous deeds. It was Mary who wasted the ointment and Judas who put forward the case of the poor: but who will believe that Judas was a better friend to the poor than Mary? There is, of course, such a thing as senseless extravagance, and even in the generosity of love there may be a trace of vanity - a man may be proud of himself in the gift he bestows on his wife; but the true wealth of the world lies in generous feeling, and there is no wisdom, nor economy, nor care for the poor, in suppressing the instinctive movements of the heart. The soul is not to be judged and snubbed by the senses; it has laws of its own of which the senses know nothing, and they are signally illustrated in this act.

**3.** This brings us to the third standard by which actions may be interpreted - not duty, or utility, but love. Jesus undertakes the defence of the woman against those who misunderstood or complained of her. "Let her alone; why trouble ye her? she hath wrought a good work upon Me. For ye have the poor with you always, and whensoever ye will ye may do them good: but Me ye have not always. She hath done what she could: she is come aforehand to anoint My body to the burying." If we observe the main points in this defence we shall see the characteristics of the action which so deeply moved Jesus that He conferred on it an immortality of fame. "Wheresoever this Gospel shall be preached throughout the whole world, this also that she hath done shall be spoken of for a memorial of her."

There are three points in the defence of Mary by Jesus which seem to call for particular attention.

**(a)** In describing what she has done as "a good work," He judges not by the senses, but by the soul. He does not mean that it was legally binding, or that it was economically sensible, but that it has the charm of moral originality and inspiration on it, like the works of God. The right which is thus inspired is not only right, but lovely, a thing of beauty and a joy for ever. The house was filled with the odour of the ointment, and the fragrance of this surpassingly beautiful deed has never faded from the Church. It was grateful to Christ as the unsought unbidden act of a child's love is dear to the mother - as an unexpected gift of the bridegroom, with no motive but love, is dear to the bride - as everything into which the heart pours its passion is dear to those on whom it is bestowed, in proportion as they are worthy of it. The motive of love, and the originality and spontaneity which ac company this motive, must characterize all actions which win the commendation of Jesus. The right must not have sunk in them into a tradition. It must not have been degraded into the observance of a statute. It must not be confounded with the sensible or the expedient which can be justified on utilitarian grounds. If it is to be recognized by Jesus as Divinely right it must be incalculable, spontaneous, creative in its originality, a new revelation of what the good can be. It is only then that Jesus can say of it emphatically, as He did of Mary's act of devotion, "a good work".

**(b)** The second important point in the defence of Mary by Jesus is contained in the allusion to His death. "Me ye have not always ... she is come aforehand to anoint My body to the burying." I have said already that we hardly know how far the company present at the Supper had entered into Jesus' anticipations of the end. It is a fair inference from these words that Mary had entered into them more deeply than the others. Even if she had no definite idea of His burial in her mind - and it is unlikely that she had - she may quite well have divined more clearly than others what was absorbing the mind of Jesus; she may have felt, as they did not, that they were not to have Him with them long. It was out of some such sympathy with Jesus, deep and passionate though obscure, that she acted; and Jesus, we might almost say, only gave it clearness and took it at its real value when He said, "She hath done it for My burial". Now this kind of sympathy, which feels what it cannot see, and which gives a depth and scope to action beyond what the actor himself can grasp at the moment, is also essential to "a good work". Nothing is supremely good that we understand beforehand all round and through and through. There must be something operative in it which goes beyond us; motives of which we cannot give a full and clear account, but which connect us somehow with God. It is insensibility to such larger if less-defined realities which makes conduct small and disappointing, and heaps up legacies of remorse. What a solemn shadow it would cast upon the company at Bethany to realize that with death so close at hand they should grudge love the opportunity of showing itself without counting the cost! Even the miserly soul becomes generous in such a case. The most grasping man does not grudge anything to make his love real and dear to the wife or the child that is slipping from his grasp. He does not know what good it can do, but he must do it. But in all that company at Bethany the one who was in deepest sympathy with the Master was the one whom the rest could not understand: an unhappy memory for them! Let us note it, as a further mark of what is divinely good, that it must be inspired by a sensitive sympathy with Jesus, a sympathy which enables us to divine His mind even when it is not formally expressed.

**(c)** The third point in the defence is contained in the words, "She hath done what she could". Unfortunately this expression is capable of being misunderstood, and has indeed been widely understood in a sense exactly the opposite of that which it was intended to bear. In our modern idiom, "she hath done what she could" is almost as much apologetic as eulogistic. The undertone is, "It was not much, of course, but what more could one expect? There is no room for reproach or censure." This, I say, is precisely the reverse of what the words mean. The disciples did not reproach the woman for doing so little, but for doing so much; and Jesus justified her, not by reducing her act to smaller proportions, but by revealing it in all its depth and height, and showing that it was greater than she herself knew. The only close analogy to it which I can recall in Scripture is the story told in 2 Samuel chapter xxiii. "And David longed and said, O that one would give me drink of the water of the well of Bethlehem which is by the gate! And the three mighty men brake through the host of the Philistines, and drew water out of the well of Bethlehem, that was by the gate, and took it and brought it to David: nevertheless he would not drink thereof, but poured it out unto the Lord. And he said, Be it far from me, O Lord, that I should do this: is not this the blood of the men that went in jeopardy of their lives?" The true sense of the words of Jesus is seen if we apply them to the three mighty men and their heroic achievement. They did what they could. They saw the opportunity for showing their devotion to their king, for doing him the smallest service at the most tremendous hazard; they saw it and seized it. They rose to the occasion, and they rose at the same instant to the height of their valour and their fame. So did Mary of Bethany. She responded to the mood of Jesus with the same instinctive loyalty with which the mighty men responded to the longing of David; she saw what the moment required, and was equal to it; she met a heart over which the shadow of death was darkening with an uncalculating outburst of love which was inexpressibly grateful to Jesus. But while the magnanimous King of Israel dared not accept the gift of his mighty men, and felt that devotion like theirs was too much for any human being, and that he must pour out the water they had brought at the hazard of their lives as an offering to the Lord - a proof that with David and his heroes it was like master like man - Jesus welcomes the devotion of Mary, and rewards it with undying fame. He does not excuse, he glorifies her when he says, "She has done what she could."

This, then, is another mark of what Jesus means by "a good work": it is a work signalized by generosity, abandonment, uncalculating devotion, and that on an occasion on which others see no call for anything unusual. There is indeed an appeal in the circumstances of the case, but it is too subtle for the unsympathetic to feel it, and too searching for the ungenerous to respond to it. They never become aware of the chances they lose of doing such good works and winning Christ's praise. They are apt to criticize devotion, as the sensible people at Bethany criticized Mary, but such criticism is only a proof that the moral intelligence and the moral nature are alike undeveloped. "Want of tenderness is want of parts."

I shall conclude with two observations on this story. of a more general purport. The first is that the act of Mary illustrates the Gospel. It does so in a way so unmistakable that Jesus Himself secures it its place in the Gospel for ever. It is told for a memorial of Mary, but it is told also to reveal Jesus. It is a characteristic page in His life, exhibiting at once His conception of what is morally lovely, and His power to evoke the reality of it in the souls of others. Here we see the very spirit of Jesus. He is one who gives without calculating. When do we most feel inclined to say, "To what purpose is this waste?" Is it not when we look at His life and death - at the tears He shed over the impenitent, at the patience with which He sought those who refused to be found, at the love He lavished on those who would not love Him in return? Is this sensible? No, but it is Divine. It cannot be justified on prudential or utilitarian grounds, but it does not need to be justified to love. Yet even Christian theologians have argued for a limited atonement on the ground that upon any other theory the love of Christ was "wasted" - thrown away for nothing. As if it were not the very tragedy of being lost that some men can perish in a world in which Christ died for all. The utmost devotion of which human souls are capable is only the reflex of that love with which He gave Himself a ransom for us, and nothing less than the utmost devotion on our part bears any proportion to that which has been demonstrated by Him.

The second observation is this: the act of Mary judges those who judge it. It provokes criticism, but the criticism recoils. It is carped at by the selfish, but the selfish are always hypocrites: they always have reasons on their side, and they always have love - which is the supreme moral reason - against them. It is not a bad way to test what we are, to ask whether we have ever done an impulsive, enthusiastic, extravagant thing in love. Have you ever done any such thing for your mother or your wife, for your church or your city, for a stranger or a friend? If so, it is a good omen. But show me the man who has never in a moment of high feeling spent what he could not justify on economical grounds, and I will show you a man not fit for the kingdom of God. "Magnanimity owes prudence no account of its motives." Love is not bound to justify itself to the utilitarian; but the utilitarian will one day have to plead his cause at the bar of love, and will find that he has none. Immortality, according to Scripture, does not belong to the economists and the sensible men, but to the martyrs; not to those whose aim is to save their lives, but to those who are willing to spend and be spent to the utmost for a cause greater than life itself. It is in them that Jesus sees of the travail of His soul and is satisfied.