SEEING, SUFFERING, HEALING: REMEMBERING THE WOMAN WITH THE ALABASTER JAR

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SAFE AS CHURCHES? IV

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(Please note that the accompanying PowerPoint has not been made available. Several slides from the PowerPoint have been included where necessary.)

INTRODUCTION

I am honoured by your invitation to be here to remember the woman with the alabaster jar and to share something of a biblical text that has both nourished and challenged me over many years. I am honoured because together we represent something of the breadth and diversity of faith traditions in Australia and I am happy to be included here tonight. A gathering such as this, where a Catholic woman would be invited to share something of scripture with people such as yourselves, could hardly have been imagined at least in my Roman Catholic tradition fifty years ago – well and truly in my own lifetime. While much remains to be done, we nevertheless have much to be thankful for when we see what has been achieved in the coming together of people of faith in this country.

I'm also very aware of the composition of this audience and aware that what I have to say will be heard in your context as people who have taken on in a public way a share in the responsibility of your faith community for the protection of children. As a Roman Catholic I am able to say that the failure of my church to prevent the systematic abuse and neglect of children by those in its own ranks stands as a sad and sobering reminder of the critical importance of the role you have taken on. I can only imagine the toll such a task takes on you: while you work to ensure that children never suffer again in this way, you must truthfully acknowledge the reality of the crimes committed against them and at the same time shoulder the burden of their pain.

My hope is that the woman with the alabaster jar will be a source of insight, strength and affirmation for you as we reflect together on her story at the beginning of this conference. I hope, too, that her presence will remain with you during these days, and long afterwards. She had much to say to those of us who work in places where there are few prototypes, and she is a skilled navigator of uncharted waters.

I am also aware that I am speaking with a group for whom scripture is a constant companion and you will therefore have your own insights and much to share. I plan to make a space for such sharing at two points in my presentation, so that you have some time with your own thoughts or in conversation with those at your table.

But now, let's begin by hearing the story together…

THE CONTEXT FOR THE STORY OF THE WOMAN WITH THE ALABASTER JAR

Before we look at the text itself and at what the woman sees, it's important to note that this story has a crucial role to play in the bigger story of the gospel. Mark has placed it at the beginning of the Passion Narrative where it will act as prologue or overture to the story of the last days of Jesus' life. As such, it will draw together the threads of the story already told and at the same time it will point ahead to its conclusion. It is a pivotal text for Mark. Matthew follows Mark's lead and places an almost identical story in the same place in his gospel, while Luke and John have other purposes for the anointing tradition and tell a different story in a different place in their gospel narratives. It is also worth noting that the two verses prior to the story tell of the hostility of those opposed to Jesus, and the two verses immediately after it tell of Judas' plan to betray him. These act as a frame for the anointing story, and direct our attention to what lies at the centre.[1]

PART ONE: TO SEE AND TO SUFFER

In the house of Simon the leper a woman, a guest at the dinner, approaches Jesus, snaps the neck of a beautiful, delicate alabaster jar and pours a very expensive scented ointment on his head. The jar, valuable in itself, is broken beyond repair. The ointment, costing upwards of $20,000 in our terms, is poured out in one provocative gesture. Is it love that motivates her action? Only love? There's nothing wrong with love as a motive, but at the hands of traditional scripture scholars it has sometimes reduced her gesture to a pious, unreflective action, one charged with emotion and therefore typically female.

Something more is at work here: the significance of the woman's act of anointing Jesus' head would not have been lost on the dinner guests, and it is this that causes their fury. Both the guests, and Mark's readers, will have immediately called to mind the various First Testament accounts of the anointing of the king-elect by the prophet or priest, and perhaps particularly the anointing of David by Samuel in 1Sam 16:13

The woman has seen something that others have not seen, and she knows something that others perhaps have preferred to deny: that Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed one, and, more, that he is destined to die. Her gesture of

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[1] Much of the material in this address has been drawn from my Masters and PhD theses (Flinders University, unpublished) which dealt with the anointing story (Masters thesis) and stories of women in Mark from a feminist/liberationist perspective (PhD thesis). In writing these two works I drew on both historical and contemporary works on the Gospel of Mark, as well as on feminist writers on this Gospel. It is beyond the scope of this paper to acknowledge every source, except where I quote them directly or rely heavily on them. The sections of the address dealing with pain and grief are my own, as is the section that deals with the comparison between the anointing story and the Last Supper.

anointing Jesus on his head carries her clear understanding of his identity, and while the woman is given no voice, Jesus without correction or reinterpretation, links her anointing to his impending death: 'She has anointed my body beforehand for its burial…' No other human character in Mark's gospel has put these two realities together. Peter, at the mid-point of the Gospel, gets it half-right: he acknowledges Jesus as the Christ, but he flatly refuses to accept that Jesus will suffer and die.

The woman's insight, however, is both burden and grace. It is one thing to SEE, and it is another to do something with the knowledge one possesses. She SEES who Jesus is, and, more, she risks censure to demonstrate in a public way what she knows.

But it's more than this, too: while the woman does not speak about Jesus' impending death, it is hard to argue that she herself has not made this connection. Jesus does not correct her when he links her gesture with his death and, set as it is at the beginning of the Passion Narrative, the story is suffused with the sombre reality of Jesus' impending absence. I would argue that while the woman's graced insight is central to the story, so is the reality of the burden she carries. In anointing Jesus both for kingship and for death, the woman shoulders the unspoken grief of the others – perhaps the grief of those at the table with her, and all the others who had been looking on helplessly as Jesus' path led inexorably towards execution. The unthinkable was about to happen, and in the face of the unthinkable, denial is one response but not, as we so well know, a long-term option. The woman with the alabaster jar chose to acknowledge rather than deny Jesus' impending death. She seems driven – away from the dark places where ignorance and denial can find a home, and into the light where, as painful as it is, she sees, and knows, bears the burden of her insight and carries the others with her.

In the work that you do:

- What happens to the insight that surprises me, compels me, blows me away?
- What about the knowledge I'd rather not have?
- What has it meant for you to carry the burden of another's grief?
- How is my role both 'burden' and 'grace'?

(Time for sharing at tables)

TO HEAL

I'd like to start this section with the story of this photograph. It was taken about 9 years ago. Sophie (the little child pictured here with me) was about 5 years old and she and her mother, and another friend of mine, had gone to Robe for a few days' holiday. I'd found the drive down there a veritable nightmare – I was tired, I'd fallen out of work with no buffer time between a hectic round of marking papers, finalising results and planning for the coming semester. I just didn't want to be in a car with three other people. You might have some sympathy with my problem! On the way down, even though I tried to snap out of a mood that seemed to have me in vise-like grip, I was grumpy to the point of rudeness. But arriving at Robe (finally) helped the process considerably. By the time I'd changed and we were ready to go to the pub for dinner, I was beginning to feel human again – and some of my grumpiness had begun to recede. When I came down the stairs of the place where we were staying, however, Sophie, complete in black plastic raincoat and hood, was waiting for me and, without a word, drew me down to her height and put her arms around my neck and held me there until she was satisfied I was smiling. Her mother had her camera in her hand, and the moment was captured.

Was Sophie relieved that I'd returned to my senses? Was she forgiving me? Was she trying to make me feel better? Or what was it that prompted a 5 year-old to reach out to an adult with a gesture of love that I've never forgotten…it was the most powerful of healing moments.

Healing can come to us in so many surprising ways and from those we might least have expected to have the capacity to make a difference to us – from our children and others' children, from the children and young adults we teach, from those with whom we work who seem to depend on us most of the time. You will no doubt have your own experience of this. I would like to return now to our text, and to the action of the woman who anoints Jesus for kingship and for death. I'd like to explore how her gesture of anointing can also be seen as a gesture of healing.

Scholars tell us that in the ancient world as it was influenced by Greek ways of thinking and acting, men (and sometimes women, in well-to-do families) joined together in the evenings to eat and to talk together. Not just any kind of talking, either, but conversation often devoted to philosophy and the big picture questions of their lives. At such dinners, these scholars tell us, once the dinner had concluded and before the conversation proper began, perfume in an alabaster jar was passed around to each member of the group and he or she would use the perfume to soothe and heal the 'sensations of the brain', as we are told – or, in other words, to calm anxiety or stress and enable the participants to enter into the conversation as freely as possible.[2] Here, the perfume has clear healing properties. And, I would suggest, it has similar properties in the anointing story that Mark tells.

Not only does the woman shoulder the burden of the grief of the others, but she in pouring the healing oil on Jesus' head, she acknowledges Jesus' 'deep anxiety and pain' as he confronts the reality of his impending death. Jesus' response: 'She has performed a good service for me…' doesn't carry the force of the Greek which reads literally: 'she has worked a good work in me'. It's the 'in me' that is important. Rather than a service performed FOR Jesus, the language suggests an action that has a deep-down effect on Jesus, one that touches the place where terror and revulsion must surely lie. And his second evaluation of her action is similarly misleading. Where the English reads: 'She has done what she could', the Greek says: 'what she has, she has made' – suggesting the woman's investment in her action, her making public what she already knew. This is a far cry from an understanding of this anointing gesture as something limited by either internal or external constraints.

Nowhere in the Gospel of Mark does a human character minister to Jesus in this way. Angels 'serve' him after his testing by Satan in the wilderness and after her healing by Jesus, Simon's mother-in-law serves the group gathered in her house but no-one reaches out to heal Jesus by offering comfort or reassurance, or even understanding and real companionship. In every healing narrative in Mark it is Jesus who is the healer and who gives and gives and gives. Now, at the very end, this woman who sees clearly what lies in store for Jesus, prepares him for the path he must tread. 'She has anointed my body beforehand, for its burial'.

'Healing' has been such a prominent by-word of the churches' various approaches to the reality of child abuse and neglect and no doubt you have pledged yourselves to bringing it about whenever and wherever it lies in your power to do so. It happens so slowly, if it happens at all, and it has its own seasons and rhythms. Sometimes you might be a privileged observer of its power but more often than not you might be left simply to hope and pray that

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[2] The material in this section, as it relates to the woman's gesture as a healing gesture, has been drawn from Elaine Wainwright's *Women Healing/Healing Women. The Genderization of Healing in Early Christianity* (London: Equinox, 2006) pp 131-138. The quotations are taken directly from this work.

it will happen some time in the lives of the people with whom you work. And what of your own life? Who offers healing to you? Where do you find it? Has it ever taken you by surprise? And, to revisit the conference descriptor: How does this woman's pouring out of healing perfume nurture and nourish you for the work being done?

What does this woman's story say to me?

TWO FINAL WORDS ABOUT THE WOMAN WITH THE ALABASTER JAR

The first of these final words is about the affirmation of the woman by Jesus and not only his affirmation but his solemn proclamation linking her action with the gospel story: 'Truly I tell you, wherever the good news (the gospel) is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.' So his story, and her story, are inextricably linked: her seeing, and suffering and healing would become part of the bigger story of Jesus' own ministry, suffering and death. Or so Jesus imagined – and so, it seems, the writer of the Gospel of Mark imagined.

In fact, his solemn pronouncement has never been fulfilled – I don't know about you, but I've never heard her story told as 'gospel', never heard the link made between her story and Jesus' story. As we saw at the beginning of this session, most people when asked to talk about a gospel story involving a woman who anoints Jesus will invariably recount the Lukan story about a woman, a sinner, who washes Jesus' feet with her tears and dries them with her hair. We seem far more familiar with women sinners than with women prophets and healers! Yet no story could be more dramatic, more telling, or more provocative than this one of Mark's in which a woman knows who Jesus is, understands his destiny, shoulders the grief of those who cannot accept it, and then turns to heal him and strengthen him for what lies ahead. It is now perhaps for us to realise Jesus' proclamation.

The VERY final word about this story concerns its link with the story of the Last Supper, as Mark tells it. You may be aware that Jesus' command to remember him in the blessing and sharing of bread and wine is found only in the Gospel of Luke and Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Leaving John's Gospel aside for a moment and focusing only on the synoptics, Mark, and Matthew who follows him, omit it from the account of Jesus' last meal with his disciples. This might surprise you – it certainly surprised me when I looked for it in the Gospel of Mark. Why, we must ask, has Mark omitted it from the Last Supper account and attached it to the anointing tradition? Luke, interestingly, has an anointing story but it's the story of the sinful woman and it functions earlier in the narrative for other purposes. John, too, has an anointing tradition but seems to combine aspects of Mark's and Luke's. In the Gospel of John, Mary of Bethany anoints Jesus' feet (not head) with perfumed

oil six days before the Passover, and Jesus interprets it as a proleptic anointing for his burial.

Whatever about the differences among the gospels, what I find most intriguing in Mark's Gospel are the similarities in the two stories – the anointing story in chapter 14 and the story of the Last Supper, recounted later in that same chapter. Let me share the comparisons with you:

A brief comparison…

- Anointing Story (14:1-11)
- Framed by two accounts of hostility and betrayal
- Themes of giving and absence
- The story has a ritual tone – came, broke, poured
- 'My body'
- 'Truly I tell you…'

- Last Supper Story (14:22-25)
- Framed by two prophecies by Jesus of betrayal and denial
- Themes of giving and absence
- The story has a ritual tone – took, blessed, broke, gave
- 'My body'
- 'Truly I tell you…

What can we make of this? You will have your own view, of course, and I'm offering my insights – and that's what they are. I've never seen the comparisons drawn out and developed in any of the reading I've done but that's not to say they're not there now. My view is that this story of the woman who anoints Jesus is, as Schüssler Fiorenza rightly states, a politically dangerous story.[3] And the fact that it is included in what is largely a patriarchal and androcentric text makes its inclusion all the more amazing.

I wonder if Mark has something to say to the reader about the Lord's Supper that goes beyond the elements of bread and wine and moves us into another sphere where Jesus can be (should be?) remembered, or made present, in other ways. Perhaps Mark is saying that when we see, when we know, when we struggle, when we suffer, when we take on the sufferings of others, when we ourselves receive healing at the hands of another and when we offer the healing that is ours to give, this too, is eucharist, in that these gestures make Jesus present in our own reality and unleash in this moment and in these places the power of his life, death and resurrection. Maybe this is another way

[3] See the Introduction to her ground-breaking work, *In Memory of Her (SCM, 1983)*

of describing the sacramentality of the work you do – and I can think of no better description or higher praise for it. I hope that the courageous and graced insight of the woman of Bethany will be, as John O'Donohue says, a compass for your souls[4], to provide light for the darker days and real joy for the days when you know that the risk-taking, the pain and the sheer hard work have been worth it.

[4]From his blessing For the Traveller, in *Benedictus* (Bantam Press, London 2007), 70