THE PRINCETON SEMINARY BULLETIN

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The Anointing at Bethany

by Robert M. Adams

A native of Philadelphia and son of the late Dean Adams of Princeton Theological Seminary, Robert M. Adams is an alumnus of Princeton University, University of Oxford, Princeton Theological Seminary, and received the doctor of philosophy degree from Cornell University in 1967. After a three-year pastorate in Montauk, N.Y., he taught at the University of Michigan, 1967-72, and is presently chairman of the Department of Philosophy, University of Los Angeles.

(Sermon given at regular Service in Miller Chapel, March 24, 1980)

Text: Mark 14: 1-9

There is a stone of stumbling in this story. The first reaction I can remember having to it as a child is that the people who thought it would have been better to give the money to the poor were right. Three hundred days' wages for an unskilled laborer, dripping down over one man's head—and then gone! What good did that do him, or anyone else? Anointing his body beforehand for burial. Haven't we all heard—and probably even said—that expensive funerals are bad stewardship?

So what are we to make of it? I still think that giving the money to the poor might have been an even better thing to do. Jesus could be taken, in this narrative, as arguing that on the contrary the woman actually did the best possible thing. But that is not asserted, and the story need not be read that way. What Jesus says is that "she has done a *beautiful* thing," and in the liberty of the Gospel that is enough. We do not have to worry about whether it was the very *best* thing she could have done. It is enough that it was a *good* thing to do, that she was free to do, that expressed her love for Jesus, and anointed his body for burial.

But why was there any occasion to prepare Jesus' body for burial? Why was he going to let himself be killed? Here is an even greater scandal that runs through the whole Passion narrative and finds an echo in this anointing at Bethany. Jesus' life dripping down with his blood over a crude instrument of torture: isn't that a greater waste than the spilling of a whole ocean of cosmetics? And we are left with the impression that it could have been so easily avoided. Jesus could have slipped away from Jerusalem in the night, to have more months or even years of ministry in Galilee; and humanly speaking there would have been nothing dishonorable about that. It would have been the obviously wise thing to do.

In the hindsight of faith, of course, his death was anything but pointless. He died for our sins. He died to save us. In his death we are reconciled with God. That is right at the heart of the Church's faith, and I believe it, and think that we can see many wonderful reasons for Jesus' sacrifice. But I confess that I am not convinced by the arguments of theologians who have tried

to go further and prove that Christ's death was *necessary* if we were to be saved, that it was the only way a holy and righteous God could have saved us. I imagine there were several other ways in which God in his sovereign freedom could have saved the world, in holiness and righteousness; but he chose the one he wanted. He chose an incarnation because he wanted to be our brother as well as our father, and a crucifixion because that was the way in which he willed to be "glorified," as the fourth gospel puts it—to manifest and embody his anger and his love.

As with the woman's sacrifice, so with Christ's greater sacrifice, we need not worry whether it was the very best thing that could have been done. It is wonderful beyond our comprehension, and dwarfs as well as defies any calculations of utility that we can make. I do not believe anyway that God is concerned always to do only the very best. Could he not have made better creatures instead of us? When the psalmist says, "What is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him?" (Ps. 8:4), does he suppose that the reason why God created us is that we are an essential part of the best of all possible worlds? Surely not. I think he rejoices with gratitude, as we should too, that God has created human life and found it good even though he could have created other and perhaps better universes without human beings. Squeezing the last drop of goodness out of the tube of possibility into actuality is not God's game. Neither is it supposed to be ours. That is an important part of Christian liberty—the liberty by which, like the woman in our text, we *may* do things that will have an added significance or even beauty because we did not *have* to do them.

There is more to say about the stone of stumbling. When I was in high school I read the saying, "For you always have the poor with you, . . . but you will not always have me," as a call from God to enter the ministry instead of devoting my life to politics as I had planned to do. I don't want to deny that God was leading me, but I blush to remember my use of the text. I must have ignored the barb in Jesus' saying: "Whenever you want to, you can do good to them. . . . Whenever you want to." You have had plenty of opportunity. But how often and how much have you wanted to? You who criticize this woman's action, have you really done so much for the poor that you have nothing left for any other sort of generosity? Far from telling us, as I imagined, that caring for the economic needs of the poor is a ministry of only secondary importance, Jesus' saying stands as a reproach to the weakness and intermittency of our concern for those needs.

And yet it does have something to say—something liberating to say—about the relation of worship and human need in our vocation as Christians, and perhaps in particular in the vocation of ministers of the Word and sacraments. It recognizes that we are surrounded by a sea of needs that are urgent, that we have to care about, and that we will never finish meeting. But in spite of this it denies that the Christian life is one in which there is room only for things that *have* to be done in order to meet human needs. The Christian life is a life in which there is room for the pointlessness of art and the uselessness

of a funeral—for fun and games, for the pursuit of truth for its own sake, in theology or any other discipline, and above all for the expression of human affection and devotion to God. To be sure, we *need* some of these things. But it is a perversion of their true nature, and especially of the nature of worship, to treat them primarily as means to the satisfaction of needs. To be really free for worship, or for love, is to be free to anoint the body of Jesus for burial without worrying about whether that will accomplish something that really needed to be done.

The Christian life is not founded on need but on gift—not on our poverty but on God's wealth. It rests on the omnipotence of God. People sometimes think of belief in divine omnipotence as inimical to human freedom, but here I think it is liberating. The reason why there is room in the Christian life for things that do not need to be done is that God does not need us as his instruments. "He hath no pleasure in the strength of an horse; neither delighteth he in any man's legs" (Ps. 147:10). He is not impressed with our strength. He is not impressed with our looks. He is not impressed with our smarts. He is not impressed with our accomplishments. But he wants us, ourselves, for himself. If he has commanded us to pursue certain ends, it is because he cares not only about those ends but also about our pursuit of them. It is part of our calling, therefore, to think of ourselves as ends in ourselves, for God, and not merely as means or instruments.

The idea of the sabbath has its place here. Sabbath is rest from work before it is specifically religious activity. Work, in the sense that is centrally relevant here, is activity that is merely or mainly instrumental and not enjoyed for its own sake. For a creator who is omnipotent and already enjoys in himself more perfection than can possibly be embodied in creatures, creation cannot be merely work. It is also play, or sabbath—doing things that do not have to be done but that he likes to do. His children are called to share in his sabbath—to have time and take time for things that do not primarily serve extrinsic necessities but are done or enjoyed for their own sakes. Among these are more optional enjoyments, such as art or philosophy or play; but the center of this gift of freedom is the possibility of worship, and this sabbath freedom itself is central to worship.