

an ecological reading of the gospel of mark

In this tenth part in the series Elaine Wainwright remembers the story of the woman who pours costly perfumed ointment on Jesus' head while he is in Simon's house in Mark 14:3-9.



Mark 14: 3 While Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. **4** But some were there who said to one another in anger, "Why was the ointment wasted

in this way? **5** For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor." And they scolded her. **6** But Jesus said, "Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. **7** For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to

them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. **8** She has done what she could; she has anointed/ ointmented my body beforehand for its burial. **9** Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."

November is a time of remembering and particularly remembering those who are our ancestors in the gospel/good news, especially those with whom we are intimately interconnected. Therefore it seems appropriate to choose for our ecological reading a story that commissions our remembering (Mark 14:3-9). This story of an unnamed woman concludes with Jesus' affirmation of remembering her together with "what she has done", what she has held and touched and poured and smelled. Her story invites us to remember our loved ones in their rich engagement with the physical and the material aspects of their lives as well as the social, that is more familiar to us.

beginning to re-member

In re-membering the pouring woman (whom I would like to name *Murisa*), we are invited into a house, a material dwelling which reminds readers of the many similar places in which Jesus' ministry has taken place (Mk 2:1, 11; Mk 5:19; Mk 7:17). The naming of the householder as "Simon the Leper" evokes Jesus' ministry of healing, of reaching out and touching and of being touched in return (See Mk 1:40-45). The house in

which readers encounter Jesus in the opening of this narrative is characterised by healing. This, in its turn, can remind readers to be attentive to the ethos that we create or bring into dwelling places in which we live and into which we enter for other purposes. It also can remind us of the places in which we re-member our loved ones and in which we shared food and life with them.

Relationships continue as Jesus and Simon and those whom we meet in Mk14: 4 are reclining at a meal. The context evoked is that of table companionship, which has been characteristic of Jesus' life and ministry. Jesus is being remembered in this story amid all the material aspects of couches, bodies reclining, and food being shared. It is into this rich material and relational context that a woman comes. The Greek phrase opening this next movement in the narrative is *ēlthe gynē* – "came a woman". She/*Murisa* courageously enters a space that is not hers according to the culture.

The gospel narrator does not pause on this anomaly, however, but moves immediately to describe her action: she brings with her a beautiful alabaster jar containing very costly ointment of nard, and

she breaks open the jar and pours the ointment on the head of the reclining Jesus. This is a lavish action and the material elements she has with her enhance this. Alabaster is a beautiful translucent marble that is gift of the Earth. The content of the alabaster jar was *muron*, a reference to a range of perfumes and perfumed oils (note that the content is not *oinon*, the term used for oil of anointing).

healing not anointing

In exploring the language and the context written into this text, it becomes clear that the action evoked is not that of anointing, just as the materials are not those associated with anointing. Rather both action and language find an echo in an ancient text called the *Deipnosophistae* [*The Sophists at Dinner*] by Athenaeus. There we learn, among many aspects important for interpreting this text, that "[a] highly important element of health is to put good odours to the brain or head — *enkephelē/kephelē* (xv.687). This suggests that the woman's action was not seen as an anointing but rather healing. It was putting good odours to the head and neck of her companion and friend, Jesus, as he faced into a most terrible death (Mk 14:1-2). And it was the beautiful



muron in an Earth-grounded alabaster jar that accompanied and enabled her healing action. Earth and its elements were brought by *Murisa* to this poignant moment in the life of Jesus — his facing his death.

right use of resources

Those sharing the meal with Jesus and Simon object to such a lavish and earthy action. They move into what can be seen as the language of “commodity exchange” — beautiful jar and ointment sold and the money given to the poor. Readers may remember, however, that there has been little indication in the Markan narrative up to this point of the concern for the poor among those accompanying Jesus. At one level, therefore, their voices do not seem to ring true.

They do, however, give us pause, especially at this time when *Laudato Si'* echoes around us as it turns our lenses to the cry of the Earth and cry of the poor. The way we respect and use Earth resources needs discernment. The voice of Jesus speaks into this, claiming that at this time, it is he himself who needs the

gift of healing *muron*. *Murisa* has made the right choice in relation to her use of resources.

Jesus re-affirms the actions of *Murisa*, interpreting her action in pouring out the perfumed ointment as a preparing of his body for burial (Mk 14: 8). She is doing what disciples, male and female do: prepare the material body of their teacher for burial (one of the many acts of re-remembering those one loves). The words of Jesus affirm her relationship with/her use of Earth resources, but also go beyond what has been visible in the story to this point.

re-remembering

Verse nine concludes this short but highly significant narrative (Mk 14:3-9). It continues to foreground the woman and her action focusing readers/listeners on the entanglement of earthed-human-bodies, including a body in extreme pain, and the power of other earth elements to heal when body and substance meet. This is placed at the heart of the “good news” that is to be proclaimed *eis holon ton kosmon* (to/in the whole cosmos) — the entire planetary realm

for contemporary readers. It is also to be remembered in time — every time the gospel is proclaimed.

The Markan storyteller does not place Jesus at the centre of this story and its remembering. Rather s/he affirms the extraordinary interconnectedness within the story’s interaction that collectively constitutes “good news”. It far transcends a single human action or person. It echoes in and through the person of the woman, the materiality of her *muron*, her extraordinary action and in the body of Jesus. The ecological reader remembers the woman precisely in what is enacted in the house of Simon. Thus, to remember the woman (and the poured out *muron*) in this way is to read ecologically. As we re-member *Murisa* during this month of remembering, we also re-member our loved ones whom we can catch up into this material and cosmic remembering. ■

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Above: Bas relief of Woman pouring healing ointment on Jesus in Simon's house.