

The fragrance that filled the house

Leviticus 2:1-3, John 12:1-8

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“So many perfumes, so little time!” was the text of a suggested bumper sticker for the car by someone on an internet site, where the number of different perfumes was discussed. This particular person reckoned there were over a 100,000 different kinds of perfumes being used all over the world, but this was just their guess. There are though some more fact-based statistics around according to which the global perfume industry revenue is around \$45 billion. It seems we (both women and men) recognise the significance of scent and spend an awful lot of money on making ourselves smell nice. As we have just demonstrated, scent is one of the most powerful of the five senses, which fulfils an important role in our lives. It can attract and it can repel. It can warn us of impending danger, it can trigger good or bad memories, it can get our tastebuds going as we enter a restaurant, or a homely kitchen. It can have preservative properties, hence the use of highly scented oils for embalming of dead bodies. It can have sacred, ceremonial or ritual uses, when in the Bible scented oils are used for anointing Kings and prophets. And it is used in some churches’ practice of worship, for healing or preparation for death.

Both of our Scripture readings today speak of the use of scent, fragrance or odour in their different ways. The passage from Leviticus – not a very often used part of the Bible – talks of the liturgical use of scent in the context of sacrificial offerings in ancient Israel’s worship. In the grain offering, as we’ve heard, the flour was mixed with oil and frankincense and burnt on the altar. The real gift was the grain, which the worshippers brought to God as a kind of requirement, or religious duty, but the scent that arose during the burning, was an added bonus, which was offered in the hope of making it pleasant as well as ‘soothing’ to God. Admittedly, it attributed God some human qualities, who would react to a nice scent in the same way as humans do, but there is no denying that it was an expression of love and respect and honour.

I am sure we can appreciate the difference this makes. When our Lunchbreak tables are not only offering food, but also tablecloths and flowers and sometimes pretty napkins, all lovingly and tastefully arranged, that is a ‘fragrant’ offering, which goes beyond the simple

satisfying of needs. And it is received as such by most of our guests judging from their kind and appreciative remarks.

By Jesus’ time the Temple sacrificial system was coming to an end and with the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the Romans in 70 CE, it was finished for good. But the idea of approaching and pleasing God with the burning of incense, the scent of which fills the house, got a new lease of life in the ancient Christian Church, some parts of which still practice it today. Based on some other OT usage, it is understood to represent the prayers and devotion of the faithful rising to heaven. In Psalm 141 we read:

*“Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and
the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice.”*

(NRSV)

So the use of fragrant, expensive nard oil used by Mary of Bethany to express her passionate devotion to Jesus in our NT reading, is not, in itself an unprecedented event. It is more the particular circumstances and the details of her action that makes it unusual, even a slightly scandalous event. We are so used to hearing these well-known Biblical stories that it is difficult for us to appreciate their significance in their own time. And the significance of this story is obvious from the fact that it appears in all four of the Gospels in different variations. Jesus allows, even welcomes an intimate, yet public act of devotion to him by a woman. All of which was socially unacceptable in that place at that time. And he makes things worse by defending the outrageous action against the objection that the money could have been used to help the poor.

In John’s Gospel the event takes place in the house of Lazarus, Jesus’ personal friend, where a special supper is given to celebrate Jesus. In this account we are only a few days away from another Supper, which will be Jesus’ last one before his death. Lazarus’ sisters, Martha and Mary are both in attendance and they both offer to Jesus their very best: lavish, practical hospitality on the one hand and a rather wasteful, intimate act of love on the other. From the sketchy story line we cannot really decide why Mary would have done this rather unexpected act. We can only guess that the very expensive, highly perfumed nard oil was her most costly possession and here she is giving it away in a moment of overflowing enthusiasm. Nothing less would do to express properly

how she feels about Jesus. She anoints Jesus' feet with it, dries it with her hair till the whole house is filled with the fragrance.

Let's just flavour this scene for awhile. Let's forget about the food, which was after all the whole purpose of the gathering. Let's forget about Martha and Lazarus with their anxiety that all should go well with the supper. Let's forget about Judas with his pious objections and the other guests, who were probably just as disapproving as Judas was. Let's just focus on Mary and on Jesus as they are enveloped in the fragrance that fills the house. This fragrance is rich and potent, it is strong and it clings to things and people, it lingers on for days on end. Both Jesus and Mary will carry this scent on their bodies well into the coming week. In whatever follows this evening the lingering fragrance will remind them both of this moment. What will they do with it, what will it do to them?

Is it possible, I wonder, that in the middle of his last Supper with his disciples Jesus catches some of that lingering scent on his feet and suddenly recalls Mary's bended figure as she, with no regard to any social conventions, anoints his feet? And as he contemplates this picture in his mind and looks at his gathered friends with loving eyes for the last time, he knows that Mary's action was more than just the love and devotion of a particular, single person. It was, in fact, the way how we should all relate to each other and love one another. Abundantly, outrageously, with all we've got, not counting the cost. For that is how God loves us. So he stands up, strips off his outer garments, ties a towel round his waist and bends down to wash the feet of his disciples, passing on an iconic action of love to remember and to follow.

Is it possible that, walking the way of his passion to the Cross, with his bruised and broken body collapsing under the heavy cross beam and abandoned by all his friends, Jesus would again smell the faint traces of Mary's fragrant, generous act and would be strengthened and upheld by it? And even on the Cross, when all is finished and questions of life and death drift in and out of his shutting-down mind, would Jesus feel the scent of overflowing, sacrificial love that doesn't count the cost?

And what about Mary? She too would have carried the fragrance on her hair for days. It would have reminded her constantly of what Jesus meant to her. It would have brought back to her the many hours she spent in his company, the many marvellous things she learnt from him, it would have kept her faithful

at the time of his death and would have made her want to tell everyone about her amazing experiences with him after his resurrection.

And what about us? In Matthew's version of the story an unnamed woman does the anointing and all the disciples do the objecting. Jesus' defence of the woman's action also differs from John's account in two places. He really appreciates the action and says: *"She has done a beautiful thing for me."* And he also adds: *"...wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told..."* (Matt 26:6-13).

Well, this story teaches us that we can make our actions of true love not just useful but also beautiful, we can make them 'fragrant' adding to them depth that enrich the memory as well as the moment. And has a lasting effect in the future too. And that this is so important that it is, actually, part of the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, which he proclaimed both in his life and teaching, but also in his death and resurrection. It speaks of God's extravagant, sacrificial love and compassion and generosity. And as we come to the Table of Thanksgiving we are invited to give thanks for it and re-dedicate our lives to respond to it.

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