

3 April 2022

Isaiah 43:16-21
Philippians 3:4b-14
John 12:1-8

It is interesting how powerfully smells can stir the memory.¹ The scent of a flower can take you back half a lifetime to your first love. The aroma of incense always returns me to the first time, as a young boy, I ever saw the temple. The smell of the lakeside, of fish and nets, still brings my father back to me, sometimes so profoundly that I weep.

I wonder what it would be like if one lost the sense of smell, what we in the Greek would, I suppose, term *anosmia*. I don't know if such a thing exists, and what terrible disease or disorder might bring it about. But I think it would be a great shame to lose the ability to pick up the wonderful range of smells all around us – and especially to then miss out on the triggering of deep memories that seem to go with them.

Just this morning, as I passed by the perfumer, the scent of nard drifted into my nostrils, and all at once I was there once more, with the Master. I have written briefly of the occasion in my Gospel, but there is much more that could be said; and it all came flooding back so vividly as my nose caught that distinctive scent.

A crowd of curiosity-seekers stood outside the door, craning their necks to see Jesus and also, interestingly enough, Lazarus, “the dead man”. He had become quite a celebrity since he strolled out of his tomb the way any man might leave an empty house.

Lazarus, who had always been shy, didn't like all the attention. I heard a stranger breathlessly ask him, “Are you the Lazarus who died and was resuscitated?” He only answered casually, “Why do you ask?”

¹ This sermon owes its story concept, and some of its sentences, to Card, *Parable*, pp.149-151; and the emphasis on smells is prompted too by Powery's “Commentary”.

Lazarus was leaning back on his elbow, next to Jesus.

Martha was hovering over us all, making certain the glasses were kept full, whether we wanted more or not. Mary seemed especially quiet that day, off to herself in the corner. I was reclining on Jesus' left, the place of the intimate friend. Lazarus was on his right, the place of the honoured guest. He hadn't wanted the special place, but Jesus had made him sit there.

Jesus was making conversation, not speaking to the group but to individuals, one at a time. Perhaps he said something that no one else except Mary heard. As I think back, I wonder if he might have said something about what was going to happen to him in just a few days. We didn't know it at the time but death hung the air, intermingled with the fragrance of food and wine and company.

Mary must have left the room for a little while, although I didn't realise it until I saw her return carrying a jar wrapped in piece of purple linen. She had been crying; she was sniffing as she walked over behind Jesus. His feet were extended behind him, as he was reclining.

I heard the seal on the jar snap and looked in amazement as she poured the perfume on his feet, making a puddle on the floor mat. As the oil spilled out so did hear tears, and she began to shudder, like a mourner at a funeral.

All at once, as if she had just realised what she had done, she took off the scarf that was covering her hair and began trying to clean up the mess she had made. As her dark hair fell loose on the floor she took it and began, still sobbing, to wipe his feet. She didn't know what to do; none of us knew what to do. We all looked on in silent, scandalised, wondering amazement. A respectable woman never loosens her hair in a room full of men. Perfume is not poured on the feet: the head, maybe, but not the feet. The only time any type of perfume might be applied to the feet would be during the preparation of a body for burial ... but perhaps I'm getting ahead of myself again. And she

– a single woman – *touched* him, wiping the perfume off his feet with her hair.²

The distinctive fragrance of that expensive perfume filled the air, wafting through the house. It is that smell in the marketplace just now that has transported me back to that precious time – a time we see as precious now, but did not immediately appreciate. For me that particular scent will always speak of death. Ironically, we were all at that dinner there because there had in fact been *no smell* just a short time before. Lazarus had been dead four days, by which time, as you will know, there should have been quite a stench. But when Jesus came, and ordered the stone be rolled away, there was no smell ... and then Lazarus came out, revived, at Jesus' bidding. It was no wonder that we were now feasting in Jesus' honour; it was no wonder that people stood around outside gawping at the spectacle of Jesus the miracle-worker and Lazarus his miracle; and it was no wonder that Mary, having had her brother restored to her, should do something to show her gratitude. But, as I said, the smell of nard will always make me think of death, because, whether Mary knew it or not, in just a few days' time Jesus would die upon that cross outside Jerusalem and his corpse would be placed in a tomb of his own. Unwittingly, Mary had anointed Jesus for burial ahead of time.

I don't know if Judas was thinking of burial at the time – I don't know whether he had really thought through what was going to happen when he betrayed Jesus to the chief priests and Pharisees – but it was clear there was something in the action that discomfited him. He was the first to speak up, into the awkward silence that seemed to drag on. “Do you realise what that ointment was worth? Do you know how many poor, hungry people it could have fed?” Of all the objections he could have raised! Here we all were astonished and scandalised by her actions, and all he can think about is economics?

²² Barbara Brown Taylor, in Dale, *Windows*, p.106

Mind you, he did act as a kind of treasurer for our little band of disciples. It turns out though that the corruption of his mind and soul extended to his attitude towards money: we were to later discover that he was accustomed to helping himself to the money for his own use.

Jesus spoke in the tone he always used when speaking from the Scriptures: “There will always be poor in the land,” he said, quoting Deuteronomy. Our minds filled in the rest of the Scripture:

There will always be poor in the land. Therefore I command you to be open-handed toward your fellows who are poor and needy in your land.³

And Judas knew as well as any of us that we had often used the contents of that money bag to assist those in need⁴ And I’ve often thought since that a pint of nard’s worth of help to the poor was nothing relative to the flood of aid and help unleashed by the faithful responding in gratitude for the love they have received through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The corruption of Judas’ soul was by then so complete that he was probably of no use to the poor anyway.

“There will always be poor in the land,” Jesus declared. Then his voice softened and he added, “but you won’t always have me”. It was his first warning to us. Others would follow, all of which we ignored. The smell of burial was in the air, but in our ignorance we had a kind of anosmia.

There are other associations with the smells of that day, characteristics of the different people involved. Sometimes we’re not so aware, or come to an awareness too late, but I think we can talk of the metaphorical smell or fragrance someone gives off.

Judas carried the fragrance of carefulness: maybe the smell of a dark room of valuables carefully locked away and rarely opened. His stated concern about

³ Deuteronomy 15:11

⁴ See John 13:29

the waste of valuable perfume appeared to reflect appropriate caution, prudence, reliability, ... as he looked after the meagre resources of our group which was without steady or settled income, anxious to provide for our needs and still have something left to give to the poor.

I didn't detect it at the time – or, if I did catch a whiff of it, I didn't really think about it too much – but now the name and character of Judas reeks of decay. His soul had been rotting away on the inside – for goodness knows how long. First, I assume, his devotion to Jesus evaporated, then his loyalty, then his honesty towards others, and then, by the time we were at dinner with Jesus and Lazarus, his honesty towards himself was lost in hypocrisy. It was not long afterwards that the rot was complete as his ability to choose good over evil disappeared completely.⁵

Mary carries the fragrance of that expensive perfume – the fragrance of grateful love, willing to give of itself. Mary's extravagant gift didn't just extend to the costly perfume. She really gave everything she had, risking the wrath of her sister who was doing all the hard work in the kitchen and serving, risking the anger of the men gathered who perhaps didn't quite trust their own feelings when a woman let her hair down in public or who suddenly felt their own devotion called into question, risking the sneer of the person who knew the price of everything and the value of nothing.⁶

The warm satisfying aroma of the kitchen attaches in my mind to Martha. But I have never had the chance to ask her what she made of her sister's extraordinary action, and I wonder what odour would attach to her thoughts and response at the time.⁷

It all makes me wonder what fragrance I give off.

⁵ Wright, *Twelve*, 48-49

⁶ Wright, *John*, p.23

⁷ See Luke 10:38-42 and Wright's reflections that Martha's issue with Mary in that story as that Mary was crossing into the male domain. See Wright, *John for Everyone*, SPCK, 2001/2004, pp.130-131.

We sat in silence, with only the sound of Mary's sniffing in the background. The looks on the other disciples' faces, the taste of the bread in my mouth, the feel of my feet on the mat and the cold stone floor, the sadness in the Master's face, all were stored inside the fragrance of the perfume that filled the house. And just today, standing in the middle of the busy marketplace, with tradesmen bartering and donkeys braying, I was lifted up and taken back in time to that sad moment, and all by the smell of that perfume. Today I wept along with Mary.

But my tears are mixed: tears of sadness for what Jesus endured mixed with tears of joy for what followed and what has been accomplished for us. The smell I associate with Jesus is that of freshness, new rain, streams bubbling up in the parched land, new growth and fruiting. It is the smell of new creation, of new beginnings.

Had I known then what was to come I would have joined Mary in her act of worship. Now my gratitude is expressed too, not in spilling (or for that matter, selling) expensive perfume, but in the wholehearted gift of my life in worship and service in Jesus name. For, as our brother Paul has written,

I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through the faithfulness of Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.⁸

Amen.

⁸ Philippians 3:8-10

Sources:

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