

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE SMELL¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Fifth Sunday in Lent, 7 April 2019

It's all about the smell, really. Whenever I return to St James' after a time away, the first thing that strikes me is the smell. If a church uses incense, the smell permeates the fabric of the building. There is an odour of the sacred space. As many of you know, I am a baker and, when I bake, the aroma of the bread fills our whole apartment and spreads down the corridor outside. Incense is like that, except that it lasts longer.

In the middle ages, a sweet smell was believed to come from the bodies of those who died as saints. Even when their bodies were moved at a later date, the so-called "odour of sanctity" was believed still to be present.²

On the other hand, we hold the disreputable in "bad odour". Perhaps there is an "odour of evil".

In the book we know as the Song of Songs or the Song of Solomon, the lover uses smell to describe his beloved. He says that the scent of her garments is "like the scent of Lebanon". His description uses sweet smelling spices such as nard, cinnamon and saffron, and myrrh and frankincense. He asks the north wind to blow on his garden, that is his beloved, so that her "fragrance may be wafted abroad".³

The prophet Hosea says that, once Israel returns to the Lord, they will have "fragrance like that of Lebanon" and "like the wine of Lebanon".⁴ Paul, in 2 Corinthians speaks of the "fragrance that comes from knowing [Christ]" and compares the fragrance of life with that of death.⁵

This morning's gospel is dominated by a sweet odour, that of the precious nard, valued, according to John at 300 denarii. Just by the way, this name, "denarius", has been appropriated by a contemporary crypto-currency similar to Bitcoin. Three hundred denarii are said to be a labourer's yearly wages, assuming that the labourer actually got that much work. If we take the Australian minimum wage to be the equivalent, the value of the nard is about \$37,400.

Nard is made from the roots of a plant in the valerian family that grows in the Himalayas. It has a sweet, musky, earthy smell.⁶ The substance used by Mary had come a long way. It had to be processed to provide the oil and then transported to Palestine. It would have taken large volumes of the original plant to make even small quantities of the oil. There is no wonder that

¹ Readings: Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126; Philippians 3:3-14; John 12:1-8

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Odour_of_sanctity

³ Song of Solomon, Chapter 4.

⁴ Hosea 4:6-7

⁵ 2 Corinthians 2:14-16

⁶ *Nardostachys jatamansi* is a flowering plant of the valerian family that grows in the Himalayas of Nepal, China, and India. The plant grows to about 1 metre in height and has pink, bell-shaped flowers. It is found at an altitude of about 3,000 to 5,000 m. Rhizomes (underground stems) can be crushed and distilled into an intensely aromatic amber-coloured essential oil with thick consistency. Nard oil is used as a perfume, an incense, and an herbal medicine.

it was expensive. As an additional piece of trivia, a representation of this plant appears on the coat of arms of Pope Francis, where it refers to St Joseph, one of whose symbols the plant is.

The event in today's gospel takes place on the evening before Palm Sunday, so it is an appropriate gospel for this, the Sunday before Palm Sunday, which is next week. In John's gospel, this event follows the raising of Lazarus, Mary's brother.⁷

Jesus was in serious danger. He had gone away across the Jordan River, to a place where he was marginally safer. Learning that Lazarus was ill, Jesus delayed travelling to see him but, after two days, and against the wishes of his disciples, decided to go. By the time that he arrived, Lazarus was dead and buried. When Jesus proposed to open Lazarus's tomb, Martha, the ever-practical sister, cautioned Jesus that, because her brother had been dead for four days, there would be a stench.

Death may have its own smell, apart from the decay. In 1980, we visited the Nazi concentration camp at Dachau. Not originally a death camp, it still had a gas chamber and a crematorium. Although the chamber was, apparently, not used for mass killings, Bev's first reaction to it was, "This place has the smell of death". She recognised it because her work had taken her often to morgues and she could not remain in the chamber.

So, this morning's gospel takes us from the stench of death to the luxurious scent of expensive perfume. The stench of decay may be regarded as natural but what of the perfume? Clearly, at least one of the disciples. Judas Iscariot, was offended. I expect that he was not the only one. Judas concentrated on the waste. But how did Mary come by the perfume in the first place? We know nothing about the family of Lazarus and his sisters, apart from what the gospels tell us. That they were close to Jesus is clear. The sisters were either single or widowed because they lived with their brother rather than in a husband's family. Possibly Lazarus was also single because there is no mention of his wife. In their context, this was an unusual group. We do not know Lazarus's occupation or his means. Perhaps, if they were widowed, Mary or Martha had independent money. It's all a mystery.

In any case, Judas was clearly right. The money could have been spent in ways that any community would have thought preferable. Jesus responds by saying that they will always have the poor with them and thus created a text that has been used to justify the existence of the poor and to deny them help.⁸ This can hardly have been what Jesus intended. He is referring to Deuteronomy 15:11: "... there will never cease to be some in need on the earth". The context of that verse, which his hearers would have known well, is a set of instructions about how to ensure that the poor are relieved.⁹ Jesus was pointing out that they had little time with him but a long time in which to live out his mission, as well as that to which Deuteronomy directed them, both of which included helping the poor and reducing poverty.

But the waste was not the only shocking thing. The scene was one of the greatest intimacy. Could you even imagine it happening today? Much less so could it be imagined then, when women covered their heads. To let down one's hair and wipe a man's feet was unthinkable and also humiliating. The washing of feet was an important ritual performed for a visitor, but

⁷ John 11

⁸ <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/slacktivist/2014/12/10/ignorant-christians-need-to-stfu-about-the-poor-you-will-always-have-with-you-until-they-can-be-bothered-to-understand-what-jesus-actually-said/http://www.catholiccincinnati.org/56108/the-poor-you-will-always-have-its-not-a-prediction/>

⁹ <https://kairoscenter.org/understanding-the-poor-will-always-be-with-you/>

usually by a servant using water and a towel. Mary was definitely not a servant and the use of her hair degraded her further in the popular view.

But Jesus accepted what Mary did, scandal and all. Andrew Marr, Abbot of St Gregory's Abbey in Three Rivers, Michigan in the USA notes:

[Mary's] gesture is ... suggestive of things to come as John places the incident just before the Last Supper when Jesus washes the feet of his disciples.¹⁰

Bethany becomes, therefore, the scene for the foreshadowing of later events. The raising of Lazarus foreshadows the resurrection. This action by Mary foreshadows the events of the Last Supper, where Jesus reverses the humiliation implicit in her action.

But there is yet more significance in what Mary has done. We often overlook the meaning of the term "Christ" that we frequently use of Jesus. We almost think it to be part of his name and might use it interchangeably with "Jesus". Actually, it is a description. It means "the anointed one" and has the same meaning as the Hebrew word "Messiah". It is the same word that we apply to the oils with which we anoint people at baptism and confirmation, "chrism".

Have you wondered, then, when it might have been that Jesus was anointed and became the Christ or the Messiah? Johannine scholar, Richard Bauckham, argues that this is that occasion. He says:

Jesu is anointed as the Messiah in Bethany before riding into Jerusalem the next day.¹¹

A story of an anointing of Jesus is in each of the four gospels. Perhaps they were the same event each differently presented by the gospel writers. Perhaps they were different events. In each version, however, the anointing is done by a woman. Thus, three women, all named Mary, are pivotal to the story of Jesus: Mary, his mother, who bore him, Mary of Bethany who anointed him as Messiah and Mary of Magdala who was the first to speak with him after the resurrection.

We have now set the scene for the last great drama of the life of Jesus. He has been anointed by Mary; the arrangements for the next day will have made. The donkey has been ordered. It is only a steep walk up the Mount of Olives to the sight of the city and then the equally steep descent into Jerusalem. Possibly, the upper room for the Last Supper has been booked and the food ordered. Perhaps the betrayer has already begun his negotiations with the authorities or is planning to begin soon.

The meal has ended, the party breaks up and the household goes to bed.

Only the scent remains.

¹⁰ <https://andrewmarrosb.blog/2013/03/14/a-scandalous-woman-as-extravagant-as-jesus/>

¹¹ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 2nd edition, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2017, p. 197



Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665)



Spikenard plant



The Coat of Arms of Pope Francis