

3<sup>rd</sup> April 2022

John 12: 1-8

### *The fragrance of life*

This week I've been on retreat with a group in Wharfedale.

Worship, prayer, teaching, silence,

walks in sunshine, showers, hail and snow,

and one evening, a gloriously silly quiz, with a round called 'Composer or Pasta?' - Rossini, Tortellinini, Corzetti...

They ran out of time for 'Paint Colour or Perfume?' but it got me thinking, about smells.

You may have read Robert and Sally's lovely thank you in the newsletter< which mentioned the aroma of bacon wafting through church the other week and all that meant to them as a memorable farewell.

Think of coffee, baking, fresh bread –a smell of home perhaps? Flowers too- the scent of hyacinths in January, lavender along a garden path, lilies in church on Easter morning.

They say the Queen in her younger days was greeted by the smell of fresh paint everywhere she went; and the smell of sanitiser and antibac may forever transport us back to lockdown.

But not all smells are clean or wholesome, some are toxic, even deadly.

In John chapter 11, just before today's reading, Jesus confronts the **stench of death**, at the tomb of his friend Lazarus, who died four days earlier. His sister Martha tries to stop Jesus removing the gravestone because of the smell, but undeterred, to everyone's amazement, Jesus calls Lazarus back to life; he stumbles out in his stinking grave clothes... from which he is released, to go home, wash, and live again.

Now, in John 12, we see the deep gratitude of Lazarus and his sisters, welcoming Jesus and his friends into their home for a meal. Since the miracle, Jesus is an even more wanted man, the priests and Pharisees out to arrest him, but he still stops in Bethany. We can imagine the stories being shared, the good food Martha serves, the bonds of friendship deepened at the table.

Judas may not have been the only one shocked by what Mary does next.

His criticism, however, reveals Mary's generosity even more starkly, as well as placing Judas by name in the story of Christ's passion, before he betrays him.

I don't want to talk about Judas today, but about Jesus and Mary. Her act of anointing is extravagant, outrageous, prophetic. Nard, imported from as far away as India, was hugely expensive and valuable. You could say Judas knew the cost of it, but Mary understood its true value.

Mary may have washed Jesus' weary feet when he came into their home; she has sat at his feet to listen and learn. And she's grasped what Jesus is about to do in Jerusalem, at the Passover where he himself will be the Passover lamb. Mary seizes the moment and anoints his feet

Of course, it causes an argument and upsets people: prophetic acts generally do. But before John tells us about Judas' complaint, he tells us this- *the whole house was filled with the fragrance.*

Mary's act is immensely powerful- her love pervades the home, reaches everyone there, lingers long after the party is over. *the whole house was filled with the fragrance.*

But is it *her* love? Is it not rather Jesus' love for her, her family the brother she thought she'd lost?

Jesus had stood at the Lazarus' tomb and wept.

'See how much he loved him', murmured the crowd,

while Mary *knew* this love personally, saw its power in her own family.

Her act of love here is in response to Jesus' love or, as John puts it in a letter some years later, 'we love because he first loved us'.

With the mourners she smelt the stench of death, but now Jesus' love, given and received, brings the fragrance of life which fills her life, her family: *the whole house was filled with the fragrance.*

On this baptism Sunday, when we pray for families and our lives together, let's consider what our homes smell like, for it will affect everyone who lives there and all who visit.

Is it the attractive aroma of affirmation, or the sour smell of criticism?

Will people be drawn in by the whiff of welcome, or repelled by mouldy indifference?

It's true in our workplaces and neighbourhoods too, and in our churches.

And at the risk of sounding like an advert for fabric softener, the difference we need is the presence of Jesus, acknowledged and welcomed in, as Jesus was in Mary's home and life.

As we pray each day, on our own, before meals, with children at bedtime, we open our hearts and minds to God's Spirit with us.

When we get dressed, travel to work, cook the dinner, walk the dog, sit and rest, we can invite Jesus's love and life to be the fragrance which fills our lives.

Kate, Geoff, Paula and Michael, you will promise this morning to support and help Xander in his journey of faith, to live and grow within God's family. Please don't leave God out. Please ensure that he, with his brothers and cousins, knows about Jesus, knows God loves him and he can talk to God every day, wherever he is, whatever he's doing. May the love of Jesus be the fragrance of your homes.

This story makes us look ahead: to the stench of death on Good Friday at the rubbish dump of Golgotha, then the women carrying perfumes to Jesus's garden tomb on Easter morning and finding, incredibly, that death has been defeated, Jesus is alive, love wins: *the whole world is filled with the fragrance of God's love.*

It also looks back to the magi who brought costly and prophetic gifts to the infant Jesus, including another perfume, myrrh, used at burial. We could say Mary's act here is the fulfilment of what that wise man foretold, her declaration that this man Jesus is also God, through whose death comes life.

May her action inspire us to believe, to pray, give and act, so that risky generosity and outrageous love, even where there is the stench of death, may bring the fragrance of God's love and life.

Amen.