

## The odour of sanctity

21 3 10

Most merciful God,  
who by the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ  
delivered and saved the world:  
grant that by faith in him who suffered on the cross  
we may triumph in the power of his victory.

My text may be found in John chapter 12 and verse 3:

‘The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.’

I love dogs. I guess animals were always part of our household when I was growing up. I guess, like many people, I am completely won over by the trusting love and faithful companionship of a four-footed friend. That said, dogs have quite a different take on the universe, on how they make sense of the world in which they live. You only have to see how they react to the smells of cooking or to watch them as they go for a walk, excited by the many and varied smells of which we thankfully seem oblivious, to appreciate that they live in a world of smell. And it is to the world of smell our sermon today turns.

The occasion of Jesus being anointed with perfume is one of the great stories in the gospels. It occurs early in Luke (7 v36 - 50) during a meal in the house of Simon the Leper with an unnamed prostitute washing Jesus' feet with her tears then drying them with her hair and anointing his feet with ointment. In John, it is

much later near the end of his ministry, in the house of Lazarus, Martha and Mary and it is Mary who prefers to sit and listen to Jesus' teaching than to share the household chores with her sister, Martha, it is Mary who performs this act of prodigal love. According to John, during a meal, 'Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.'

It was a beautiful smell; it was a beautiful act. But what did she think she was doing? Simply what she did was an act of love; of kindness; of generosity. She is showing in public how much she respected the man who was a family friend; the man who had restored her brother to life; the man she, her brother and sister recognised as the Messiah. To act in this way cost Mary a lot in terms of money and in terms of laying bare in public what she felt in her heart.

But it is the cost that so upsets Judas. Now Judas is a practical, pragmatic man who knows the cost of everything which makes him ideal for looking after the disciples' shared purse. For Judas, Mary's action is a shameful waste of money. He knows how much they could have got if they had sold the perfume, pure nard, and how much money could have been available to give the poor. In his gospel, John accuses Judas of wanting to embezzle some of the money but let's be charitable for a moment and imagine Judas is being honest. Judas is understandably appalled at the waste because Judas lacks the imagination and the love to see what Mary is doing, to appreciate that a woman might love Jesus more than he does. He knows the cost of the act but he does not value it.

But Jesus recognises both the cost and the value of the act; he acknowledges and justifies what Mary did. Jesus sees her act as a preparation of his corpse for death. Jesus knows what awaits him shortly in Jerusalem and Mary intuitively, by her act, has anointed him in preparation for the grave which awaits him. Jesus defends Mary in a way that does not belittle the poor but points to the transitory nature of our incarnate life: 'You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'

And we are left with the smell. The memory of a particular act in time, which filled the house with its fragrance, is left to challenge us. In 2 Corinthians 2 v14 and 15, Paul makes this challenging observation on the role of Christians: 'But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him. For we are the aroma of Christ to God'. Just as Mary did so too are we invited to make the world better by our presence, to perfume the world by the fragrance of our deeds.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,  
Amen.

*Preached at the Eucharist  
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H: Sermon 21: Odour

