

**The fragrance – a sermon preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on Sunday 13 March 2016 by Kerry Enright, based on John 12:1-8.**

Smell is prominent in two chapters in the gospel of John: a man who smelt of death and a room fragrant with perfume.

Lazarus, in chapter 11 had died and had been in the tomb four days, so long that his sister Mary didn't want the stone of the tomb rolled away because of the stench of death.

But the stone was rolled away and Jesus called him out of the tomb.

The scene shifts to a family meal days later.

Here was the man, Lazarus, who smelt of death, now smelling of life, sharing a meal with them.

One of the strangest dinner guests you could have.

Now, here is Jesus, who smelt of life as much as anyone could smell of life.

Mary seems to be anointing his feet in preparation for his death; a man who smells of life now fragrant with the perfume of death.

Perhaps Mary had used the same perfume to anoint the body of Lazarus days before, before he died.

Perhaps the fragrance evoked a memory, a recent memory, and here they were, with the fragrance of impending end now filling the room, being prepared for the impending death of Jesus, yet sitting in front of us is the fresh-smelling Lazarus.

So this fragrance evokes a mix of feelings, we are being prepared for the death of Jesus, and yet, that smell hints at new life for Jesus – the smell of death and the whiff of resurrection.

Our sense of smell is powerful – people who have lost their sense of smell attest to its power.

- The smell of New Zealand after we have travelled or lived overseas – ahh, yes, I remember that scent – what is it: grass, pine trees, flax seeds, cow pats
- Roses or Jasmine or
- Freshly baked bread
- Coffee and now the incredible variety of tea
- A new born child

Smell affects feelings.

Smells awakens memories.

It can take us back to a place or incident in our past, the smell of a certain food that takes us to our childhood.

Neurobiologists suggest that smells can change our moods, our behaviour and the choices we make, often without us realising it.

And the smell we give off, communicates how we feel - fear or sadness or stress or ?

For a time it was thought humans were not good at smelling things.

Most mammals can code 1000 different types of smell, humans only 400.

Now it is recognised that in humans the nose and the brain are strongly connected.

We are well equipped to process smells.

So here we are ... the smell of bread and wine to awaken memories, to affect our spirit, our attitude, our behaviour, our feeling.

Mary knew the power of smell.

She was so grateful for the new life of her brother, that she acts in what seems a highly personal, costly, public and risky way.

She lets loose her hair – scandal! And she takes a pound of costly perfume, anoints the feet of Jesus and wipes them with her hair.

In the book of Revelation, the Laodicean church is criticised for being neither hot nor cold, for being lukewarm.

Mary is not lukewarm.

People like Mary are so full of gratitude that they spend their lives for others, in the way of Jesus Christ, and they change the atmosphere, fill the air with fragrance.

They pour out their working lives and their other time, their skills and their energy, for the sake of the world, in the way of Jesus Christ.

Judas got his calculator out. Mary's anointing did not calculate on a cost benefit basis.

Sell the perfume, he said.

Spending in this way makes little sense if we use narrow criteria.

I came out of a funeral. Anne had died, a woman in her early forties. She had lived a remarkable life. After the funeral, we spilled out into the church courtyard and a couple of friends joined me. One friend was overcome with the inspiration of Anne's life, how she had served overseas, how Anne and her husband had developed their farm as organic, how she tried to live an integrated life of faith and action. For him the service was full of fragrance. Another friend looked at his watch and said - the service was an hour and a quarter long. He had his calculator out.

It is easy to be ruled by calculators, including in the church.

To approach the church as if it is just another organisation with customers, where people pay their way, where people are seen as volunteers to be motivated like volunteers, where possibilities are calculated according to a cost benefit analysis.

That is a sad and tragic misunderstanding of the church.

The church is a body, a body of Christ who poured out his life for the world, in a costly, personal and public way, the fragrance of which awakens our senses and changes the atmosphere.

That's what Paul experienced.

According to calculations, of the tribe of Benjamin, as to zeal a persecutor, as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Now let me get out my calculator. Yes, that adds up. Very good.

"Yet, whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus."

The church is people who pour out their lives, because however uncertainly, they have seen enough new life, enough of Lazarus, enough of Mary, enough of Jesus Christ, to risk time and skill, energy and imagination, personally and publically.

People like Mary change the atmosphere. They fill the air with fragrance.

They have smelt freedom, and the perfume cannot be put back in the bottle.

That's what scared the authorities.

They knew that once oppressed people sensed freedom, society would change.

And Jesus Christ was that freedom.

In the Hebrew tradition of new life, the passing of the former things, a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

Such a way threatens a world where death is used as a means of power and control.

We are hearing more leaders threatening death. We live with the smell of death.

And when people challenge views or systems, they are often threatened with the death of income or status or reputation.

In the gospel today is the smell of death. We cannot avoid it.

And amid the smell of death is the whiff of resurrection.

Julia Esquivel wrote a book of poetry called Threatened with Resurrection.

Esquivel was a school teacher in Guatemala and she was forced into exile for challenging the government.

Guatemala has a violent history, a history of oppression, much like the time of Jesus.

In her poetry, she remembers the people who have died for the sake of justice.

Although dead, they are the ones who threaten resurrection. She laments those who have died and yet, she says, they live.

Because the powers will not be able to wrest from us

Their bodies,

Their souls,

Their strength,  
 Their spirit,  
 Not even their death  
 And least of all their life.  
 Because they live  
 Today, tomorrow and always  
 On the streets, baptised with their blood.  
 And in the air which gathered up their cry,  
 In the jungle that hid their shadows.

So it is that those who died in the struggle, threaten what kills and demeans and diminishes, with resurrection.

It's there in the room, with Mary and Lazarus and Jesus.

It's here at the table, the fragrance of death with the whiff of resurrection.

For the life, death and resurrection of Christ are a threat to what closes life down.

The fragrance of his life cannot be taken away, and it calls forth our own fragrance, in gratitude.

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*growing in courage to live the Jesus way*



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