

The smell of heaven

Isaiah 43:16-21; John 12:1-8

In some Christian traditions this Sunday used to be known as 'Passion Sunday', marking the time when Jesus is getting closer to Jerusalem and Calvary. Jesus is in Bethany, that little village, one and a half miles east of Jerusalem and on the south-eastern slopes of the Mount of Olives. He is in the home of Martha and Mary, and of Lazarus, miraculously raised from the dead. It is in that context that this little poignant domestic scene is set. How do you say thank you to someone who has brought back from death someone you loved? Martha cooks. She is not worse or better than Mary – it was simply her way of thanking Jesus. Practical, necessary, and intimate. Did she know what Jesus liked to eat? Did she scour the village for the delicacies and treats that was her chosen, personal way of saying thank you to Jesus? And in their home, when Jesus and His disciples arrived, what would have been the cooking smells that would have greeted them? A roasting of meats? The air fragrant with spices and herbs? The smell of baking? Before Mary performed her act of devotion by anointing Jesus' feet with the costly perfume, let us not forget that there was a simple but equally devoted action performed by her sister Martha that also carried with it the aroma of heaven. To make a meal, to be involved in its planning and preparation, its cooking and its serving; that's a great act of love that many of you, if you share a home, or visit others, take for granted. The smell of heaven is also found in the newly baked bread that Martha would have made. It is no less passionate a gift on this Passion Sunday. I like that.

At the table, with Jesus and the disciples, and Martha, Mary and Lazarus, another thanksgiving for the return of Lazarus to life is made. Some scholars suggest that Mary may have sung as she anointed Jesus' feet, quoting from the Old Testament Song of Solomon, one of the most passionate books in the Bible, "While the king was on his couch, my nard gave forth its fragrance...I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys..."ⁱ It was a great gift, the Spikenard. And it was extravagantly given, for its perfume filled the whole house, and would have mingled with

the smells of cooking, so that both gifts, the ordinary and the extraordinary, would have wafted through the house together. I like that too.

Not only did she use the extravagant ointment, rather than anointing Jesus' head, which would have been normal in Jewish tradition in those days, Mary anointed Jesus' feet, perhaps a symbol of what Jesus was Himself to do in a few days' time, when He washed the feet of His disciples. Last year at Holy Week, in the face of a lot of opposition, foot-washing was offered on the day we shared communion. More came forward in what was undoubtedly an intimate moment. As it was for Mary, as it was for Jesus. There was a little Nard in the water, and those close to it could smell it. In the act of washing, in the act of drying, in the act of intimacy, in the act of gentleness, something happened.

Some years ago I was visiting one of our older ladies who was in hospital, slowly, gracefully, coming to the end of her life. Whilst I visited I remember a nurse asking if I would mind if she washed the lady's hands and feet. She had a bowl of warm water, and some aromatherapy oils. As she gently washed, I talked, I prayed, and the lady relaxed as we talked about the things that were on her mind and heart. I will never forget that moment; the smell of the perfumed oil, the gentleness of the nurse's actions, preparing an old lady for dying through acts of kindness and love.

I wonder if in the actions of Martha, cooking her meal, the Last Supper is echoed? I wonder if in the actions of Mary, anointing and washing feet, the actions of Jesus washing His disciples' feet is also echoed?

Blake Lively is an American actress and model. She once said: "If you want someone to miss you, go secretly and spray your fragrance somewhere." Fragrance is one of the most personal things. Ask anyone clearing a house after a loved one has died – the smell of their perfume in a bottle; the smell of a coat that was worn. It is so fleeting, but it is so powerful, evoking rich memories.

"Jesus does not take issue with the temporary nature of the gift. He declares it is appropriate in that moment, particularly in the light of His impending death. He is gracious enough to receive it

with gratitude.”ⁱⁱ Judas may question whether it was money well spent, seeing a more practical use for the money. Jesus accepts what Mary does for what it is, a passionate, extravagant kindness.

“Lots of extravagant gifts are put into the air where they soon evaporate. A church choir labours to prepare an intricate anthem and in (a few moments) it is gone. The teacher prepares the lesson, stands to deliver, and then class is adjourned. Mourners provide large arrangements of flowers to honour those whom they grieve. Saints donate large sums of money for their congregations to spend. Why do they do this? Love has its reasons.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Throughout His ministry, particularly as recorded by John, Jesus provides abundantly. Wine at the wedding of Cana; five thousand hungry people fed by the Sea of Galilee; watching Peter fishing all night with little result, until Jesus tells him to cast his net on the other side of the boat. There is abundance wherever Jesus is present. Jesus draws out abundant reactions from those around Him. Like Martha; and like Mary.

On this Passion Sunday it poses a challenge to us as we think about the passionate, profligate abundance that Jesus provides, and evokes from others. Either we love generously, or we do not. Either we are already engaged in providing for the poor, or we are secretly hoarding what might otherwise be shared. Either our faith tells of a generous orthodoxy that is broad and inclusive, or it is a narrow, blighted thing that judges and excludes.

“Much of modern religion focuses on only on what is useful, practical and cost effective. Concern for austerity arises when resources seem slim. Yet when it comes to the life of faith, we may discover our hearts diminished if the budget is our first concern. Should we live spendthrift lives? No. Can we justify the wasting of God’s gifts? Not really. However, long before a gift can be wasted, it must first be received.”^{iv}

Jesus is God’s gift to the world, sent into a world that did not request Him, offering life to a world that engineered His death. His concern for the world and its people was passionate. The outrageous extravagance of His love was not doled out in small parcels. Understand even a fraction of that about Jesus, and you will understand the unstinting gifts of Martha and Mary, as

they gave because they loved, and through their gifts, the smell of heaven nourished and comforted Jesus in the days leading to the cross.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

ⁱ Song of Solomon 1:12; 2:1

ⁱⁱ William G Carter, Feasting on the Word, Year C, vol 2, p142

ⁱⁱⁱ ibid

^{iv} ibid p 144