

Fifth Sunday in Lent
Year C - 7/4/2019

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

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

“The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.” (John 12:3b)

If there is one medical condition I hope I never suffer from I think it would be anosmia. Sounds simple enough - and unfortunately common enough, too - anosmia is the term which describes the loss of one's sense of smell. I can't imagine how my life would be without my ability to smell.

And today's Gospel reminded me of it - of how powerful a trigger is our sense of smell. In fact, the Russian novelist, Vladimir Nabokov who wrote the novel *Lolita* (amongst many others) said the following: "Smells are surer than sights or sounds to make your heartstrings crack." And I think he is right.

Often it is pleasant smells that we remember - for me, the smell of fresh bread that Mum had made every day when I got home from school; the smell of roast lamb cooking; the smell of a winery; the residual aroma of incense in a church, the smell of the frangipani flower...

Just think, for a moment, about those smells that transport *you* somewhere - back to a place that you remember well.

(Of course, there are other smells that do not have the same pleasant connotations. And let me tell you, as a nurse for almost 20 years there are plenty of them I could describe to you - but won't!! But the point is well made I think - the sense of smell works powerfully on our memories...)

So, to the scene which confronts us in this morning's Gospel, and the competing aromas which overlay this apparently straightforward episode as it happens.

Firstly, and most obviously we have the smell of the perfume, costing almost a year's wages, permeating every nook and cranny of that room. That smell which stands in direct contrast to and seeks to try and overcome the aroma of death, which is referred to directly, and which will soon come to Jesus. Perhaps it is also the smell of love in the face of certain betrayal - because I don't think it is a coincidence that John specifically tells us that it is Judas who objects most vehemently to the actions of Mary.

The perfume of anointing represents the smell of extravagant love. It is Mary's foreshadowed embodiment of Jesus' commandment -- "love one another as I have loved you." Abundant grace that thus far, only Jesus has been able to bestow. And nowhere has this grace and love been more evident than the events which occurred just a few verses before in John's Gospel.

Let me take you back there, to the previous chapter, where we hear about another aroma: "Martha, the sister of the dead man said to Jesus 'Lord, already there is a stench, because he has been dead four days.'" (John 11:39)

This outpouring of emotion and gratitude by Mary today does not seem at all strange or out of place to me, in light of what Jesus has done. In the same way that Jesus restored sight to the man born blind, and restored hope and dignity to the woman caught in adultery, so too Jesus has restored Lazarus to his family - his sisters who love him. And so, Mary anoints the feet of her savior.

The simultaneous and competing aromas of life and death -- that's the hard part about this text. While we may want Mary's devotion to make the odour of death dissipate, that is not, unfortunately, possible. Death and life exist together.

The point of this last Sunday in Lent is twofold - firstly, so that we might not get too far ahead of ourselves - to rush forward to Easter Day's resurrection joy instead of remaining with Jesus in his passion.

Even now, as the aroma of the perfume fills the room, Jesus still warns about his impending death - “she brought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial (John 12:7).

The other reason is so that we are not mis-led - not to kid ourselves. In one way, nothing changes with Jesus’ resurrection. Death will still be as it is. Death will still seep through every crevice that we might try to stopgap. Death will still find the smallest crack to invade our assurances that resurrection is true.

And yet, on the other hand, of course, everything changes with Jesus’ resurrection. Just don’t let the sense of abundant love and life associated with it to allow you to think that the specter of death won’t be there as well.

For it is true to say that it is while we sense death that we can experience life. It is, just as these two passages from John sit together, that while we can barely stand the smell of Lazarus Mary pours perfume on Jesus’ feet.

We can’t choose to smell one thing over another. That is the point of smell. It takes control of us, taking us over. It is just there and somehow, somehow, you have to deal with it, whatever memory it brings back, whatever feeling it elicits, whatever good or bad effects it brings on.

That is the power of the sense of smell. It permeates our life with the good and the bad, the powerful and the painful, the delirious and the difficult.

And that is the power too of this story, especially here and now looking forward to the last week of Lent, and leading us to Holy Week. It holds together Lent and Easter so very tightly that you wonder how you can separate the two -- and the point is that you can’t. One does not exist without the other -- that is the truth of the incarnation.

The truth is that Jesus came to bring us life, but that life will only come through his death. And so the truth of this reality becomes the very hope of the incarnation, for us also.

“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”

May our lives, too, be filled with the fragrance of God’s abundant love and grace...

The Lord be with you.