

April 6, 2025 – Revd Wim Kuiper
Anglican Church Arnhem & Nijmegen

Readings: Isa 43.16-21; Phil 3.4b-14; Joh 12.1-8

‘And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.’ (John 12.3)

Of all our senses, it is apparently smelling that leaves the deepest tracks in our brains, that is in our memories. A certain scent, say of a flower or of some kind of food, or also less pleasant ones such as the smell of burning coals, can bring us back to experiences from the past, sometimes in a sudden and unexpected way. Just like with the other senses, we can also relate beauty to certain smells. And when I say beauty we can also relate to the dimension of holiness. In many worship traditions, Christian and non-Christian, the use of pleasant smells such as from incense plays a major role. We can indeed experience God with all our senses. Also with smells, it is a matter of individual taste what we like and what we don’t like. But my guess is that I would not make many here happy when I would introduce using incense in our services. ‘Smells and bells’ as it is called in church language. Rest assured, that is not my intention.

I think it is fair to say that seeing and hearing are the more prominent senses in the Bible, compared to smelling and also to touching and tasting. But there are of course also many Bible passages in which smelling and smells are mentioned, mostly in a quite positive way. In the book of Genesis, there is a striking image of God himself smelling the first sacrifice Noah brings him after the flood when he just left the arc: “The Lord smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: ‘Never again will I curse the ground because of humans, even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood.’” (Gen 8.21) In the Old Testament, it is in particular the book called the Song of Songs that is full of wonderful smells. This book is all about the generous love between two lovers, taken also as a metaphor for the love between God and humans and for Christians the love between Jesus and his disciples. The Old Testament language around fragrant sacrifices and offerings is taken up by St Paul and applied to Jesus as in his letter to the Ephesians: “And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” (Eph 5.2)

All of these references come into play in today’s gospel passage from John, which, unlike the similar stories in the gospels of Luke and Mark, explicitly points us towards the effect of Mary’s action by that lovely sentence: “And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.” This also provides a strong contrast to the smell that we heard about in the previous chapter: the bad odour connected to the body of Lazarus, whom Jesus subsequently raised from the dead and who is now a prominent member of the dinner party. But that very pleasant, indeed beautiful smell of pure nard perfume has also everything to do with death. The death of Jesus which is imminent. Mary is blessing his body as a preparation to become that fragrant sacrifice that St Paul speaks of. And Mary by wiping Jesus’ feet with her own hair is deeply connecting herself to his way of the cross. She is enacting what Paul expresses in today’s epistle reading: ‘I want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.’ (Phil 3.10-11) This way of discipleship of Mary and of Paul comes with sacrifices, with great generosity, with a love that does not count the costs.

Someone who is still very much into the habit of worldly counting, is that other disciple of Jesus called Judas Iscariot. He may show the right and kind care for the poor, but John tells us that his heart is really somewhere else, as he is struggling with some of those evil inclinations of all our

human hearts. I guess we are invited to use this story as a way of reflecting on the character of our own discipleship. Where we can position ourselves on kind of a scale with Mary and Judas on the opposite ends. With Martha doing a great job by serving this diner also pretty much on top, close to her sister and silent Lazarus probably slightly more down because of his passivity. But then again, he might still has to find his feet after being resuscitated and so we can't blame him. That certainly feels like a proper Lent exercise and it might indeed be part of John's intention by contrasting Mary and Judas in this striking way. But in doing so, I think it is good to take heart, to feel encouraged by those words of St Paul that are today also given to us. Christ Jesus took hold of us, just like he took hold of Mary, Martha, Lazarus, Judas and Paul. And now we are to take hold of that for which he took hold of us and of them. And so let us forget what is behind and strain towards what is ahead. Let us like Paul press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called us heavenwards in Christ Jesus. How can we do this? By letting the house of our souls and bodies be filled with fragrance of sacrifice, a fragrance that will then spill over to those around us, as we continue to serve Christ by serving them, not counting the costs of our love.

Amen