

Reflection on Sunday 3 April 2022 online by Forbes Mutch, Lay Leader of Worship

(Gospel reading: John 12. 1-8)

When coronavirus first emerged as a new medical condition (is it only two years ago?), one of the common symptoms that upset people the most was losing their sense of taste and/or smell.

Headaches and high temperatures you can treat with paracetamol and they go away within a few days. A tickly cough is irritating but doesn't cause lasting damage. And tiredness is something that most of us of a certain age suffer from anyway.

I'm not denying the seriousness of coronavirus, which has led to cases of 'long COVID' and directly to the death of over 160,000 people in the UK and 6 million worldwide.

But, thanks largely to the vaccines that have been developed, for the vast majority of sufferers, the symptoms are now relatively mild and containable. But losing your sense of smell still happens and can be very distressing.

The condition is called Anosmia [pronounced Ah-naasmia] and can last for months when caused by COVID. The worst side-effect of Anosmia is that that it significantly alters your

sense of taste and, therefore the enjoyment of eating. But that's not all.

When I was confined to a long stay in hospital a few years ago, I met a man who had lost his sense of smell due to chemotherapy. He said that the worst thing about it, apart from losing his appetite and not being able to smell fresh air and flowers when he left hospital, was that his memory was never triggered by a smell.

How many times in our lives does a particular smell cause us to recall a place, a person, a certain circumstance or a phase of our growing up?

Smell and scent are important.

Which is why my favourite line in John's story of Mary anointing Jesus' feet is where the author says: *The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.*

Over the years, Bible scholars have analysed and dissected the symbolism and meaning of this passage; the contrast between the tactile, almost erotic Mary and the scheming thief Judas; the introduction of embalming perfume at the beginning of Christ's passion, rather than the end; and Jesus' surprisingly casual statement, *'You'll always have the poor with you'*.

Put all that aside and it leaves me with a rather bizarre question: what memories for the Disciples who were present that day were later inspired when they caught a whiff of expensive Nard perfume?

It's not like cooking an omelette and having the smell of fried onions in the kitchen for days afterwards, or walking through a shopping centre and smelling a branch of the soap shop Lush.

No, the fragrance of Mary's expensive perfume filling the whole house represents her unashamed love for Jesus. She alone of everyone present in the story seems to understand what is about to happen to Christ; she alone wants him to know that he is the most important presence in her life.

She knows (and Jesus knows) that, by custom, you don't anoint the feet of a living person, but only the feet of a corpse, as part of the ritual in preparation of a body for burial.

The others in the room were confused, maybe affronted, by Mary's actions at the time, but would they later remember the 'smell' of her adoration?

And that raises an important question for me as I go about my day-to-day life - can people ever 'smell' the scent of my

faith? I don't mean that literally, but I can't think of Mary's extravagant devotion and not feel compelled to wonder about my own demonstrations of Christianity in action. How generous are they? How lavish are they? Are they ever utterly extravagant?

The fragrance that filled that house in Bethany has lingered through time, even to our own day but, rather than condemning Mary for being a harlot or, like Judas, being shocked by her wasting a valuable asset, I'd like to be inspired to emulate Mary's devotion to Christ, not only in prayer and worship, but in my work in the world.

Taste and smell are important senses and I'd like people to 'sense' my faith by actions, just as the disciples could smell Mary's. Amen



https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1559_Bluntschli_Maria_Magdalena_Fusssalbung_anagoria.JPG
Mary Magdalene Anoints Christ's feet; Nikolaus Bluntschli (1559); Stained glass; Deutsch, Rechteckscheibe