

Homily for People and Parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday 6th April 2025 - Lent 5

Readings: **Isaiah 43:16-21**
Philippians 3:3-14

Psalm 126
John 12:1-8

It's amazing how a smell can powerfully evoke memory. It could be memory of a person, a place, or even an emotion. An example of this for me is that when I smell pipe tobacco, or creosote, I think of my Dad! And, when I smell bracken drying in the sun, accompanied by a hint of seaweed and salt, I think of a particular valley in Wales.

For each of us it will be different, and I wonder which of the following smell suggestions evoke memories, or emotions, for you? Please imagine the smell of scones baking, or coffee brewing on the stove. The smell of sunscreen at the beach, or the smell of leaf-litter after rain. The smell of furniture polish on old timber, or jasmine blossoms at night. The smell of cooling ANZAC biscuits on the bench, or the smell of freshly mown grass.

Bearing in mind these reminders that smell can evoke memory, we can consider this weekend's Gospel reading from John with new insight (John 12:1-8). For, in this reading a very intimate scene is described with Jesus being hosted by three of his friends: Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Clearly, some of the disciples were also present because Judas gets a mention as things unfold.

They were sharing a meal – as friends do – with Martha serving the food. Martha the active doer, not for the first time exercising her gift of hospitality, ensuring that people were fed and comfortable. Then, at some stage in the meal – I imagine after the main meal had been eaten – we are told that Mary came forward with a pound of costly perfume made from pure nard, and with this anointed the feet of Jesus. She then wiped this perfume away with her hair, and *'the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume'* (John 12:3).

In our time we are familiar with perfume brands like Chanel and Christian Dior, but the nard mentioned in the Gospel is not familiar. Nard is an amber-coloured oil derived from a flowering plant which grows in the Himalayan Mountains of Nepal, China, and India. Two thousand years ago it was regarded as one of the most valuable oils in the world, and was used as a perfume and a medicine. Some writers suggest that in the same way that diamonds and gold are regarded as precious commodities in our time, so nard was valued in the ancient world.

If we have any doubt about its monetary value, Judas Iscariot is remembered remarking that the perfume could have been sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor. At that time three hundred Denarii was the equivalent of twelve month's wage

for a skilled labourer – so equivalent in our time to be about \$80,000. It was a lot of money!

And, if this generosity was not scandalous enough, we are told that Mary wiped the perfume off the feet of Jesus with her hair! In a culture that expected an adult woman's hair to be only unbound in the presence of her husband, Mary unbound her hair in a room full of men, before using it to wipe the feet of a close friend. What was she thinking?

To be honest we can never know what she was thinking. We get a hint maybe when Jesus told Judas to leave Mary alone, and not to criticise her. When Jesus inferred that Mary had intuited things would get terribly tough for him in a matter of days, and that he would lose his life because of this.

'Though we can never know why Mary did these things we can imagine and surmise.

An easy start would be to suggest that Mary loved Jesus in a very profound way. She believed that he was the promised one, the Messiah. She had seen Jesus do the impossible by bringing her brother, Lazarus, back from death. And, she had some sense of the impending clash between Jesus and the religious authorities in Jerusalem. How could she reassure Jesus of her love? How could she express that he meant the world to her? Mary gave more of her financial resources than was considered wise and publicly expressed her love and loyalty without worrying about the opinion of others.

With this in mind there could be much for us to think about when considering the ways that we express our love for the one we call 'Lord' and 'Saviour', 'teacher' and 'friend', 'Jesus' and 'Christ'. Much for us to think about as we head towards Holy Week and Easter.

Of course, the smell of that nard would have lingered for days in the room where they had gathered, and in the clothing of all those who had been present. It would have lingered in Mary's hair, and maybe the skin of those beloved feet that were soon nailed to a cross.

In the months and years that followed I wonder what emotion that the smell of nard brought to those who had been present on that day when Mary unbound her hair. Perhaps love, and hope, and sadness... all mixed together?

Would you please join me as I close in prayer...

Holy God we give thanks for the gift of smell and memory. We give thanks for the love and hope we find in you, and ask for the grace to be intuitively generous in the same way that Mary was all those years ago. We pray in the name of the one she loved, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Questions:

1. Mary used an amount of nard that was worth twelve months wages to express her love for Christ. How do we express our love for God through financial generosity?
2. Mary unashamedly let down her hair and used it to wipe the feet of Jesus. Are we worried about the opinions of others when we express our love for God?