

The Fragrance of Christ

Call to worship – Our Lent Liturgy

Give us this day our daily bread to cement our friendship...

That we may feel loved, wanted, needed, cared for,
that we may offer love and care where it is needed.

Give us this day our daily bread to cement our friendship...

That we may live companionably with you our soul friend,

that we may live companionably with our friends and neighbours.

Give us this day our daily bread to cement our friendship...

That together with you we can be love and hope for others,
that together we are there for each other.

O Lord our God, on this Lenten journey, be our friend, let us be friends and let us be be-friended, we pray. Amen.

Hymn – StF 136 Morning has broken

Morning has broken like the first morning
Blackbird has spoken like the first bird
Praise for the singing, praise for the morning
Praise for them springing fresh from the world

Sweet the rain's new fall, sunlit from Heaven
Like the first dewfall on the first grass
Praise for the sweetness of the wet garden
Sprung in completeness where his feet pass

Mine is the sunlight, mine is the morning
Born of the one light Eden saw play
Praise with elation, praise every morning
God's recreation of the new day

Prayers of thanks using senses

For our prayers of thanks I invite you to consider each of your five senses – can you think of something for each sense to give thanks for (and I realise that for some people one or more senses may be weaker)

Perhaps the warmth of the sun on your face, or the smell of coffee. The birds singing or your favourite flavour. Maybe the latest book you have



Loving God we give thanks for each of our senses, each different, but each in their own way enabling us to experience your wonderful creation.
Amen

Reading – John 12 v 1 – 8 (The Message) Anointing His Feet

Six days before Passover, Jesus entered Bethany where Lazarus, so recently raised from the dead, was living. Lazarus and his sisters invited Jesus to dinner at their home. Martha served. Lazarus was one of those sitting at the table with them. Mary came in with a jar of very expensive aromatic oils, anointed and massaged Jesus' feet, and then wiped them with her hair. The fragrance of the oils filled the house.

⁴⁻⁶ Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples, even then getting ready to betray him, said, "Why wasn't this oil sold and the money given to the poor? It would have easily brought three hundred silver

pieces.” He said this not because he cared two cents about the poor but because he was a thief. He was in charge of their common funds, but also embezzled them.

⁷⁻⁸ Jesus said, “Let her alone. She’s anticipating and honouring the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you. You don’t always have me.”

Prayer of Confession – Roots on the web 2022

Please, forgive us, faithful God,
when we fill the rooms we enter with negativity, not warmth.

Forgive us, and bless us with love like that of Mary.

Forgive us when we justify our reluctance to give and share.

Forgive us, and bless us with love like that of Mary.

Forgive us when we are slow to express gratitude,
and take what we have for granted.

Forgive us, and bless us with love like that of Mary.

In Jesus’ name we pray.

Amen.

Assurance of forgiveness

Ever-giving God,
we sometimes close our hearts to you and to others;
but your heart is always open,
pouring out your grace and love,
filling our lives with the fragrance of forgiveness
and friendship,
wiping away our fears and our regrets,
and receiving the thanks we would offer you.
May the trickle of our praise become a torrent,
and may the whole world be filled with your truth.
In Jesus’ name we pray.

Amen.

Hymn –StF 161Speak O lord

Speak, O Lord, as we come to You
To receive the food of Your holy Word
Take Your truth, plant it deep in us
Shape and fashion us in Your likeness
That the light of Christ might be seen today
In our acts of love and our deeds of faith
Speak, O Lord, and fulfil in us
All Your purposes for Your glory

Teach us, Lord, full obedience
Holy reverence, true humility
Test our thoughts and our attitudes
In the radiance of Your purity
Cause our faith to rise, cause our eyes to see
Your majestic love and authority
Words of pow'r that can never fail
Let their truth prevail over unbelief

Speak, O Lord, and renew our minds
Help us grasp the heights of Your plans for us
Truths unchanged from the dawn of time
That will echo down through eternity
And by grace, we'll stand on Your promises
And by faith, we'll walk as You walk with us
Speak, O Lord, 'til Your church is built
And the earth is filled with Your glory

Reflection

I don't know if you've ever had a philosophical argument with yourself, or with someone else, about the order or importance of the senses. Which is the least useful? Which is the most useful? Again I am aware that some of you may find that some of you may find your senses diminishing in various ways and so your answer would probably be "the one that I've lost or is failing! is the most important or most useful." But assuming we all have a perfect set of five senses what would your answer be?

Personally I would probably say the least useful would be the sense of smell. Some of you may have experienced a loss of the sense of smell during covid or may still have a diminished sense of smell. My dad has lost his sense of smell completely (nothing to do with covid) and so, while he no longer gets headache walking through the perfume department of large stores, there could be a problem if there was a fire or a gas leak. Each of our senses has a part to play and of course that is why God gave us five of them – and that's a sermon for another day.

But it seems to me that at the moment, we are being led to believe how important our sense of smell is. So many things we buy seem to have a fragrance attached to them. It's a huge commercial business. Just think about the Yankee Candle Shops – whole shops dedicated to selling scented candles of every shape, size and fragrance. Bahama Breeze, Kilimanjaro Stars, Mango Peach Salsa, Jelly Beans, Holiday, Watermelon Days ... and so on and so on!

Walk through Nottingham and on the road between Victoria Centre and the back of the Council House, you come across a bath and beauty store. You don't even have to go in to catch the fragrance drifting onto the road. Even in our supermarkets there are dozens of different air fresheners. I remember shopping for washing up liquid with my dad and we realised that we were both stood staring at row upon row of bottles trying to decide which fragrance to choose! Smells are big business and that's before we even think about perfumes and aftershaves.

Here in this story we are told that the "[the fragrance of the oils filled the house?](#)" Just close your eyes for a second and imagine your favourite smell filling this room. It's a lovely description isn't it? "The fragrance of the oils filled the house"

But what exactly was that fragrance?

Well first of all there was the actual fragrance itself, the literal fragrance, the smell itself. In the version which we read together we are told that it was aromatic oils. In other versions we are told that it was nard – or spikenard to give it its full title. So I've been trying to find out what nard smells like – not an easy task. From what I can gather spikenard mainly smells earthy and rooty, with some pungent spiciness, a few hints of other shrubs or floral scents. There are a variety of different plants and so there are slight variations depending on which type it is.

But as well as the literal fragrance I wondered what other sort of fragrance there may be.

First of all there's the ***fragrance of gratitude***.

This account takes place in the chapter after Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. So it's not surprising that Martha and Mary, and indeed Lazarus, would have wanted to invite Jesus to their home to offer him a meal to say thank you. Martha, we are told, served, and in Luke's telling of the story of course she gets quite upset with Mary. "Master, don't you care that my sister has abandoned the kitchen to me." Mary chose to show her gratitude by sitting at Jesus feet and pouring oil on them, the best oil that there could have been. Martha chose to show her gratitude by serving, working in the kitchen. Both equally valid responses of course. How do we show our gratitude? By being busy, by doing even more, by getting busier and busier. Does this mean though that we haven't got time to sit at Jesus' feet and just say thank you, give him our true,

sincere thanks, the best thanks that we can possibly give him. Can we accept that we don't always have to be doing to be thankful? We can be thankful by just being still in the presence of God. Mary gave of her absolute best, the best that she could afford. Do we give the best that we can, or are we too busy going from place to place, that what we offer in thanks is not the best that it could be?

Then there is the **fragrance of risk**.

In so many ways, Mary was taking a risk. In the first place she was taking a risk just by just being in the same room as the men. According to culture she should have been preparing and serving the meal just like Martha. Perhaps that's why Martha got so cross in some of the other accounts. And by sitting at the feet of a man she was taking even more of a risk. Indeed to many Jews it would have been a scandal!. And as for letting her hair down in public, in front of men, that was probably too much for many of the Jews present. One step too far. Maybe Judas's response was not only about the cost of the perfume, but also about Mary's presence and actions. How could she? Why do you let her? But Jesus didn't rebuke Mary, didn't scorn her, and didn't tell her to go away. Instead he allowed her to sit and offer what she had, what she wished to offer.

And indeed wasn't so much of Jesus' ministry about risk ...

risk in who he chose as his disciples;

risk in who he chose to mix with - tax collectors, the poor, the marginalised, children, women, foreigners like Samaritans and gentiles;

risk in what he taught about;

risk in where he went and what he did.

Jesus was prepared to take a risk for what he believed, little wonder then that he didn't rebuke Mary for the risk she was taking.

What about us? How prepared are we to take a risk for Jesus. We often talk, don't we about, what we are called to do, how often we find that it is outside our comfort zone, how we have to take a risk in responding to God's call.

At the simplest level though there is really no risk to calling yourself a follower of Christ in this country. But we must remember that in many countries Christians put their own lives and those of their families at risk just by saying "I am a Christian," or by possessing a bible. That's really taking a risk for Christ. The latest figures record again and again the declining numbers of people in this country who say they have a Christian faith. Are we willing to speak out, to profess our faith? There have been people in the news who have been reprimanded for wearing a cross to work etc and it seems that every Christmas now a school is in the news because of some aspect of it's nativity play. How ready are we to take a risk and speak out?

Then there's the **fragrance of love**.

In other gospels a woman anoints Jesus on the head, and in some ways you could understand that. After all wouldn't you rather stand and pour oil on someone's head than get down on the dusty, dirty floor and look at someone's dusty, dirty feet. I know which I'd rather do.

I don't know about you but in my mind Jesus feet were spotlessly clean, beautifully formed as a new born baby, no calluses, no marks, no dodgy nails. At least that's how many of the pictures of this story depict them. Would this really be the case? Maybe not, and yet Mary got down on her knees, looked at them, poured oil on them and then wiped them with her hair. I suggest that this was an act of love for Jesus. She would know that his feet would be at the very least dusty, at the worst bearing the scars of someone who had spent three years roaming around the countryside preaching and teaching, probably very painful and yet that's what she chose to do. And isn't that what Jesus himself did in the very next chapter of Johns Gospel. He got down on his hands and feet and washed his disciple's feet, the job that really belonged to the household servant. Jesus

was willing to become a servant to show his disciples that they too should become like servants to show God's love. "Now that I, your Lord and Teacher have washed your feet, you should also wash one another's feet." And of course that's what we're called to, to get down on our knees and become servants of Christ.

My final fragrance is the **fragrance of recognition**.

In many ways I can quite understand Judas' words in response to the extravagance of Mary's actions,

"Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor?"

John makes it quite clear that he was saying this, not because he really cared, but because he was a thief. The question is perhaps one we have asked ourselves when you look at what governments choose to spend their money on at the expense of the most vulnerable in society, those most in need. It's a legitimate question I think. But Jesus' response must have really puzzled them.

"Leave her alone. It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial." Had

Mary recognised what Jesus had been telling them – that he would have to die. Had her recognition gone even further, that this person to whom she was in gratitude, for whom she had been prepared to take a risk, whom she loved, was indeed the long promised Messiah? And as such she wanted to anoint him like so many of the old testament kings had been anointed and to do it before he died, while he was still alive, to do it while she could.

So we've looked at the fragrance of gratitude and thanks, the fragrance of risk, the fragrance of love and the fragrance of recognition. And if we could have each of those fragrances in our lives what would we have, we would have the **fragrance of Christ**, because we are so **grateful** for what he has done for us, we **recognise** him as the Messiah, the one who came to earth to die on the cross so that we might be free, who **loved us and continues to love** us even to the point of becoming like a servant to wash our tired, dusty and less than perfect lives, and **who took a risk** for us and for so many others who the world of his time rejected and the one who continues to take a risk on those he calls.

- and isn't that what we so want for this world, it's what we're called to do for a world so much in need of it. Because we are grateful and because we recognise this Jesus, then we are prepared to take a risk and love so that through us the fragrance of Christ might evaporate off us, like the most expensive perfume we could buy and touch the lives of all around us. And that would be far more precious than even a year's wages!

Amen

Hymn – StF 446 I will offer up my life

I will offer up my life in spirit and truth
Pouring out the oil of love, as my worship to
you
In surrender I must give my every part
Lord, receive this sacrifice of a broken heart

*Jesus, what can I give, what can I bring
To so faithful a Friend, to so loving a King?
Savior, what can be said, what can be sung
As a praise of Your name for the things You
have done?
Oh, my words could not tell, not even in part*

*Of the debt of love that is owed by this
thankful heart*

You deserve my every breath, for You've
paid the great cost
Giving up your life to death, even death on
the cross
You took all my shame away, there defeated
my sin
Open up the gates of heaven and have
beckoned me in
Jesus, what can I give, what can I bring

Prayers for others –

We pray for those for whom we owe the fragrance of gratitude

Those who work in our emergency services, both here and abroad
Those who work with our children and young people
Our families and friends
Our churches

We pray for those who suffer the fragrance of risk

Those who worship you in countries where they are persecuted
Those who work in dangerous places
Those who work for peace
Those who stand up for justice or speak for those who have no voice
Those who feel the way is to risk their lives to get to another country, but who are often exploited by others

We pray for those who need the fragrance of love in their lives

The marginalised
The unloved
The lonely
The hungry
Those who are unwell, in body mind or spirit
Those who are worried about finances

Give to us the fragrance of recognition that your way is the best way, that your kingdom is the best way, that we may work for you so that the fragrance of Christ fills the earth.

Amen

Hymn – StF 76 Give me oil in my lamp keep me burning

This sums up the service I think, give me joy - keep me praising, give me peace - keep me loving, give me love - keep me serving. But we're going to start by singing the verse which isn't in the hymn book, Give me oil in my lamp keeping me burning, and the oil we are asking for is the anointing power of the Holy Spirit to keep us burning for Christ.

Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning,
give me oil in my lamp, I pray;
give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning,
keep me burning till the break of day.

*Sing hosanna, sing hosanna,
sing hosanna to the King of kings!
Sing hosanna, sing hosanna,
sing hosanna to the King!*

Give me joy in my heart, keep me praising,
give me joy in my heart, I pray;
give me joy in my heart, keep me praising,
keep me praising till the break of day.

Sing hosanna, sing hosanna,

Give me peace in my heart, keep me loving,
give me peace in my heart, I pray;
give me peace in my heart, keep me loving,
keep me loving till the break of day.

Sing hosanna, sing hosanna,

Give me love in my heart, keep me serving,
give me love in my heart, I pray;
give me love in my heart, keep me serving,
keep me serving till the break of day

Sing hosanna, sing hosanna,

Blessing –

As you have called us here today, now send us on your way to fill the world with the fragrance of Christ, so that all the world may know the extravagant love of God.

Amen