

Sermon, Lent V, April 7, 2019
Church of the Ascension, Chicago, IL
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The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume”

I celebrated the noon Mass here at Ascension on Ash Wednesday and of one my non-Episcopal friends, a Baptist minister decided to attend.

I was visiting with him a week later and remarked that I wished he had come the evening High Mass on Ash Wednesday, where he could have experienced a Eucharist with incense and our wonderful music. I was thinking that incense in particular would be a rare treat for a Baptist. “Oh, that’s okay”, he said. “I was able to smell the incense in the stone and in the wood of the church building”.

We can sometimes take for granted that the stone and wood of our church is permeated with the smell of incense, the smell of church, the smell of our offering. When I’m celebrating the Eucharist, I like to be a little liberal with the incense. I want the church to feel and look ethereal, even otherworldly.

Incense, music, and ceremonial support the drama that is so much a part of our worship here at Ascension. Dorothy Sayers, the mystery writer and translator of Dante, and also an Anglo-Catholic, once said that “the drama is the dogma”. By which she meant that the content of our faith, the content of what we Anglicans believe, is no better communicated then in the drama of our worship.

I share this little story about drama and incense because I want us to pay attention to the element of smell that pervades our Liturgy here at Ascension, and that coincidentally pervades the story we have just read from the Gospel According to John– the anointing of Jesus by Mary of Bethany. We could just as easily have entitled the story – The extravagant worship of Jesus by Mary of Bethany, or even the perfumed worship of Jesus by Mary.

We will also want to notice that the experience of smell links this story, the story of the anointing, with another, in the previous chapter of John, the story of the death and rising of Lazarus. I hope this story is familiar to everyone as well.

In both stories, both dramas, we are drenched in smells – in one, the anticipated smell of Lazarus’s dead body as Jesus calls him forth from the tomb, and in the second, the story of the anointing, the smell of rejoicing and celebration as Mary of Bethany pours expensive ointment over Jesus’ feet and wipes them with her hair. Death and life come together in these two stories. They are mixed together like a recipe, as they mixed together in our Eucharistic worship – “we celebrate and preach Christ crucified and risen from the dead”.

In this morning’s story of the anointing, Lazarus is also present, as he was of course in the previous story. This time he is all cleaned up, unbound, and sitting in the bosom of his family as if nothing had happened. We can imagine him at the head of the table.

The attention of course, is on Jesus, but on Lazarus as well. The occasion for Martha and Mary's little party is both a celebration of Lazarus' return to his family, and a celebration of the return of Jesus to the little community at Bethany after several days' absence in the wilderness.

Can you imagine such a meal? If you were there, what would you say to your neighbor in the next seat, and how could you have avoided staring, that is until Mary lays aside the serving of food, moves silently toward Jesus, and begins what can only be described as act of lavish and extravagant worship, that even upstages the presence of Lazarus.

In her actions she breaks all social custom, both in the expense of her offering (it amounts to about \$20,000.00 in our present currency) and in an act that has traditionally been, in holy scripture, the province of men, in the anointing of kings. She also leaves us with a sense of the personal cost of her worship, the cost to her reputation that parallels the cost of the ointment, and the cost of Jesus' life and death.

It was surely a wise decision on the part of those who compiled the Lectionary, that this reading from John should be used just prior to observance of Passiontide and Holy Week, a time when our focus and attention will be on the most solemn liturgical season of the Christian Year, when our attention is all about worship, when Christ does it all, and there is nothing left for us to do but worship.

As we approach Passiontide and Holy Week, the celebration of the death and resurrection of Jesus, our Gospel reading poses a contrast and a juxtaposition – as our attention moves back and forth, first to the smell of death signified by presence of Lazarus, and then to celebration and restoration that permeates the entire room as Mary pours out her perfumed libation; and then back again, to the smell of death, as Jesus reminds us of his body anointed for a future burial. This back and forth, death and life, life and death, fits the mood of the coming Holy Week. The drama unfolds before our eyes in the drama of our worship. Life and death - linked end on end, both in John's story and in our coming Rites.

In our Eucharist, our Mass, we are, and will be, one with Mary of Bethany. Her action is joined to ours in the drama of her worship and the drama of our own. Here in this place we are present with her through the mystery of our Liturgy. Here time stops. Here in this place, in this action, her time is our time.

Our worship happens through music, sermons, prayers, readings, visual images, through ceremony, through the dance of mutual cooperation and effort; through the wonderful drama of all we do.

We are not inclined at Ascension, to strip Christian worship of all but a few senses. We bring to our worship a heightened attention to all the senses, including touch, taste, and smell. Mary of Bethany prefigures all of this in her extravagant worship.

But the significance of our worship is not in the form itself, not in the drama itself, but in the object of our worship. We are to lay ourselves penitent, thankful, and expectant, at the feet of

Jesus as Mary does. We all should be aware of the spiritual dangers of empty ceremony. The Scriptures are full of such warnings. We will not want our churches to be whitened sepulchres. We can imagine that Mary smelled of her worship for days and weeks afterwards, up to and passing the time of Jesus' death and resurrection. As she went about with her daily life, the smell of that perfume must have stayed with her, and perhaps even with everyone who attended that celebration.

Annette Osborne, a pastor, tells of a time when she went to a funeral for one of her friends. As she entered the church, she was given a small sealed plastic bag with a small card inside and told not to open it. Halfway through the service the congregation was invited to take out their little bags, to open them and to take out the card inside. The church filled with the smell of her perfume. She had worn the same scent every day of her life. But it was more than that. The space filled with her presence. It was her.

When I read that story, it got me thinking about my friend who attended our Ash Wednesday Eucharist and spoke of the smell of the incense in the very stone and wood of our church, our building smelled of, and smells of worship, every moment of every day.

I wonder what it would mean for the smell, for the essence of our worship, to linger, not only in the wood and the stone, but in our flesh and bones, in ourselves, our souls and bodies? Our worship does not end when we walk away. It can, like Mary's perfume, seep into our hearts and souls, as we seek to embody the presence of Christ in the world. There is so much drama in our Gospel story this morning, and so much drama in our worship. And of course, so much drama out there in the world, a world that could use a little perfume from time to time.