

## Sermon Archive 501

Sunday 8 September, 2024

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reflections on the Sense of Smell

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



### Introduction - Evocative smells and Botanic agendas

On the Sundays mornings of July and August this year, when I've thought to, I've gone out to the garden and snipped a sprig of daphne from one of the three nice healthy bushes I planted. I planted daphne in a garden without daphne for two reasons. The first is that my mother told me that when she went to her first ball (with a boy), her mother had given her daphne to wear in her hair. So daphne makes me think of my mother and grandmother, and the love between them. The second reason is that I love the smell. Smell is, I think, evocative of people and places. I remember one Sunday afternoon, putting on a roast lamb at home - with rosemary, potatoes, pumpkin, peas and yams. As the roast came out of the oven, I found myself back at my grandmother's house. She did a Sunday roast. And putting my nose to the hole in the base of a Phrenology bust I'd found in an antique shop, I went straight back to St Paul's Anglican cathedral in Dunedin, where I used to go to evensong. Smells take you places.

Smells are caused by what the scientists call Volatile Organic Compounds, small particles that separate from their larger objects and drift in the air - then to be detected by chemo-receptors possessed by other living things. Little particles projected then detected.

Flowers emit volatile organic compounds in order to attract insects (but sometimes bats) that are useful for carrying pollen from plant to plant, thereby cross-pollenating and causing reproduction. So part of smell is about attraction. Another part of how flowers smell is about producing compounds that are **unattractive** - to frighten away herbivorous insects - insects that tend to eat plants (things like aphids, caterpillars, weevils, moths). So smell is all about attraction and repulsion of insects that come and go.

Two things are worth noting - just briefly. (1) It takes energy to produce volatile organic compounds, so some flowers only do it until they've been

pollinated. Then they stop smelling. Tropical orchids are an example. While they look fabulous, they hardly ever smell. They're preserving their energy. (2) Many different insects can pollinate a flower, and not every insect is attracted to the same smell. Enter the fly, which quite likes faeces and decaying flesh. Enter also, then, to attract the pollen useful fly, the fascinating Corpse flower - one of which has pride of place in a glass house at our very own Botanic Gardens. It last bloomed in January of 2020, attracting long queues of locals keen to get a whiff of the rancid, disgusting rotting smell. I hope a few flies also came to visit, because that would have been what the plant was trying to achieve.

It's Spring Flower Sunday, and today we're focussing on smell. Evocative, strategic, attracting, repelling, life-causing, wonderful. The sense of smell.

### **Music for Reflection**

**Lesson:** Exodus 30: 34-38

**Reflection:** A fragrance rare and guarded

Moses believes that his God wants him to mix up some incense, and make the burning of it a part of his worship. I don't imagine that we should be too surprised, since if you believe that God lives in the sky, and smoke rises up into the sky, then it might feel, I suppose, like you're giving something to God when you're making smoke. Interesting, isn't it, that while Hebrew people long used incense (not anymore), and some Christians have used incense, Buddhists also have, as have Hindus, the Shintos of Japan, the ancestor worshippers of China, and the ancient Egyptians. And in this part of the world, for sixty thousand years the aboriginal peoples of Australia have had their smoking ceremonies. Many places of worship have been places of incense. Moses wasn't alone in using smoke and smell in worship.

What I find interesting in the conversation that Moses is having with his God, is not so much that he's instructed to burn, nor the precise instructions on how to make the incense smell nice, but the prohibition that's put around it. Moses is told that this incense is for use in worship alone. It must not be used for any other purpose. Anyone found burning the incense privately (at home, at a party, anywhere other than in the tent of the presence), is to be cut off entirely from the people. It's called "banishment", "excommunication". Seems a bit severe - I wonder what's going on there.

Do you remember when Matariki was first made a public holiday? Various leading voices from Māoridom made pains to warn that while public holidays tend to attract sales at Briscoes, Super Liquor and Rebel Sports, it would be culturally offensive for anyone to use Matariki to make money. So far, in the main, we've responded fairly well. Not so, of course, for Christmas and Easter, which sometimes leave us feeling like our sacred things have been stolen and turned into something quite foreign - lovely, happy, but alienated from their cultural and religious roots. I wonder whether God's prohibition over the incense is a calling for us to hallow holy things - not to lose touch with their original purposes - since the original purposes are about perceiving God and offering our best. Maybe this fragrance is jealously guarded out of respect. Don't let it loose in the world where it might be mocked or lose what makes it special (that power of the smell of the roast to take us to our grandmother's house, the power of the incense to take us to God's tent where **God** is present) - we don't want to clutter that. We could talk about that some more . . .

**Hymn**: Worship our God in the beauty of holiness

**Lesson**: 2 Corinthians 2: 12-17

**Reflection**: A fragrance common and free

Imagine going all the way to Troas to catch up with your brother Titus, and not know exactly where to find him. I guess what you'd do (given that there are no cell phones) is go to the part of town where you reckon he's likely to be. Have you seen Titus? Ok, where **else** might he be? So you go to the second most likely place, draw a blank. Maybe then you go to the big public places then, ask some strangers - what does he look like? Good question. You come up with an answer that may or may not reveal why you're looking forward to seeing him (brown eyes, dark hair, about yay tall - not helpful in the Near East). I wonder how long it takes, and how many unfruitful conversations you'd have before you accepted that he's just not here. Better try another city altogether. Macedonia, here we come.

Paul consoles himself for his wasted time by working on the following idea. As he has fluffed about in Troas, talking to strangers and getting nowhere, it has in fact not been a fluffing around. It's been a triumphal procession - since in his engaging with the locals the fragrance of knowing Christ has gone to every corner of the city. The presence of the Jesus people (or just the single Jesus person) has been like a perfume pervading every part of

the city. Perfume for those who are saved. Perfume for those who are perishing. Perfume for all - and all to a purpose that Paul calls "triumphant".

Isn't it interesting that Paul, a Hebrew, who would have associated fragrant offerings to God to be somewhat jealously guarded, now describes the sharing of a perfume of offering with everyone as triumphant. Here there is no jealous guarding of the "smell of God". Here it's to be spread and shared (blown by the Spirit) as widely as possible. Yes, part of him still wants it to be received with joy and respect, but no longer is he guarding God as if God is delicate or needs defending. Nor perhaps is he so persuaded by the idea that God is only in the temple.

Maybe this is because *his* Jesus spent more time being present in the discourse of towns and cities and fish markets than burning offerings in the temple. Maybe it's because Troas is full of good and horrible smells, so his mind is on the imagery of aroma. Who knows. But his use of the "fragrance of knowing Christ" image says something about Christian confidence and sharing - the all-pervasive presence of the love of God. If the waft of God has seeped out into the city, then that, for Paul, is a triumph.

**Hymn:** Crown with your riches crowns

### **Epilogue**

I wonder if the progression we've seen in these reflections (from faith as a closely guarded treasure, to faith as a free aroma in the world), mightn't give the Church pause for thought. I wonder how our life within the world might change if we were happier less to worry about boundaries between church and world, and about whether God's purposes need our protection, rather than simply our love and common use. I wonder what we would come up with, if given time to discuss what the fragrance of God might be in our city today, and how it might be detected - (Ooo, do we smell a whiff of God?)

We might explore some of that in our prayers. But for now, we keep a moment of quiet.

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