

“The fragrance of change” [ADD INCENSE TO BOWL]

- Just this past week I have finally begun to notice the change outdoors
 - Have you noticed yet?
 - Maybe it was the benefit of perspective of being out of town last week, but to return after being away a few days you notice changes
 - Like the flowers beginning to push their way up through the ground again
 - The shade of green beginning to be seen in the lawns- just a little- and the absence of white snow and ice on the ground
 - But the thing that really caught me this week right after returning home was the smell
 - It was fresh, refreshing scent on the breeze accompanying the rays of sunshine, hints of spring
 - Scent, or smell, is a very powerful thing to me- it almost interrupts the other senses and cannot be ignored
 - It has the ability to repulse me, captivate me
 - And as research suggests I am not the only one here¹, to activate memories almost like no other sense we have
 - It is the main reason I love incense so much- nothing triggers my church brain like the smell of incense
 - I can be standing in the processional line just talking away, but when that smell reaches me, it centers me
 - It brings me back to why I am here, why we are here
 - I’ve joked around with acolytes and choirs alike, that it smells like God
 - But this week, it was the fragrance of change, the smell in the air as winter slowly begins to give way to spring.
- It is no accident that you and I are also over half way through our Lenten journey and fast this year as well
 - We too are nearing a liturgical transition that will take us through the dark of the tomb and into the light of Easter
 - Our prayers, readings, all of our liturgical resources are begun to prepare us for the coming Easter

¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/brain-babble/201501/smells-ring-bells-how-smell-triggers-memories-and-emotions>

- Transitions seem to be the theme of the week, and I believe it is ever present in our readings this morning as well.
- And if we were to imagine ourselves in our Gospel reading this morning, no doubt it would be the fragrance that we would remember so vividly
 - As we hear this passage, right away we have our hint of transitions to come, John says, “Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany.”
 - As the timing suggests, it will be 6 days from now that Jesus shares the Last Supper with his disciples, celebrating the Passover
 - Followed very soon by his crucifixion
 - This is Jesus’ last stop on that symbolic “road to Jerusalem”
 - Six days also has some symbolic meaning², as since Seven days is considered a time of completion,
 - The number of days God took to create and rest
 - And the number of days in a week
 - This purposely starts a count down... the big transition has begun.... six days until it is finished.
 - And he stops at the house of some of his closest friends, Lazarus, Mary, and Martha
 - Of course they are among his biggest supporters, his most loyal and passionate disciples
 - How could they not be? They witnessed their brother Lazarus brought back from the dead!
 - This is Jesus’ last chance to gather his strength, his endurance, his courage before the time of trial
 - We get a glimpse of just how much Jesus means to this family through the actions of Mary
 - Much like last time, Martha is serving, and Mary’s full attention is on Jesus
 - Much ink has been spilled on these two faithful and passionate women who clearly loved Jesus very much
 - But I do not see one as being better than the other, or one as being more faithful than the other
 - They simply had their own preferred way of expressing their devotion, Martha being moved to host in the best way she could
 - Cleaning the house, cooking the meal, serving it- an active love
 - Mary had her own way: she gave Jesus her full attention at the expense of everything else

² <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/lent5c>

- And in this visit, she shows everyone just how much she values Jesus over all the other things
- She takes a pound expensive perfume, the thick kind that does not wash off with water, it's lard, oily
- It is worth three hundred denarii- I found some attempts at calculation suggesting this was worth around \$20,000 ³
- And she pours it out, anoints Jesus' feet of all things, and wiped them with her hair
- John records that the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.
- The odor stinging in their nostrils, and locking it in their memories for ever
- The intentional foreshadowing to the anointing of a body for burial
- Judas was also quite uncomfortable, and it was not limited to the public display of affection
 - And sometimes when you're preaching you just simply have to talk about something that comes up in the readings
 - Something that grabs our attention and needs some discussing, even if it is not the main point of the sermon
 - Judas objects, I bet he is feeling the tension in the room, the awkwardness of Mary and Jesus interacting very intimately.
 - He also realizes that the perfume is very valuable.
 - So he objects to it all, and sets up a false dichotomy here of helping the poor on one hand, and worshipping and giving to Christ on the other
 - As if they are in competition, which is untrue
 - Our duty is to do both, they are both good things, to help the poor, and to further God's kingdom right here in this room
 - Jesus however sees that is really going on, and he says that the Poor are always with you, but you do not always have me.
 - We must be careful... I have personally had another Christian tell me that this is justification for not helping the poor,
 - because we can never eliminate poverty, so we are off the hook to try
 - This is wrong.
 - Jesus is not telling us to give up on helping the poor
 - Instead Jesus is quoting from Deuteronomy chapter 15:7, where God tells Israel to help the poor
 - In fact, God makes it very very plain to Israel that if they see a person in need they are most certainly supposed to help

³ <https://ask.studybible.info/301/how-much-was-a-denarius-worth-in-jesus-day-compared-to-today>

- God goes on to say, since there will always be need on earth, Israel should always be ready to open their hand to the needy
- Jesus is not changing the rules.. instead Jesus responds directly, and personally, to Judas.
- John gives us some insight and says that Judas was a thief, so we can conclude that he has actually been siphoning money off the top
 - And instead of helping the poor, has been helping himself.
- Poverty will always be there as long as Judas and people like him refuse to help, and steal money for their own gain
- Jesus is saying, the poor will always be with YOU, Judas, because you do not help them and they remain in need
- And! Jesus says, “but you do not always have me.”
- You see, Judas has not only helped ensure that the poor will always be there, but he will go on to help ensure that Jesus will not, by betraying him
- Burn.
- And here they all are, packed into the house
 - Trying not to be embarrassed at the seeing the physical intimacy between Mary and Jesus
 - Witnessing Jesus take down Judas with the truth right there in front of everybody
 - Everyone is a little on edge
 - And this intense, overwhelming fragrance that has notes of sweetness, death, and change hanging in the air
 - It is times like this that I believe Jesus pulled from his own faith tradition for comfort and support
 - He knew what was coming, he knew he would die soon, they were already out to get him, and it was only a matter of time
 - Perhaps Jesus is drawing on his own faith tradition, remembering passages like the one we use heard in Isaiah
 - Where God tells the people, “I am about to do a new thing”
 - In this passage, Isaiah writes to the people of Israel as they are well into their exile
 - Nearing the end of it, as we know from history, but to them it sure seemed endless
 - At this low point, God promises to do a great new thing, a new thing that will make previous experiences of God’s salvation pale in comparison
 - At this low point for the people in the room, they too were about to see an act of salvation like none before

- Perhaps this morning our best approach to this text is to take a deep breath, allow the fragrance of this incense to take us into this narrative
 - To to bring us into the room with Jesus and his closest friends
 - Perhaps we too are smelling the fragrance of change in our lives and the world around us
 - Maybe we are like Lazarus, Mary and Martha- high on our mountain top of recent awareness of God in our lives
 - Lazarus was dead, and is returned- how much rejoicing they must have done
 - So much that like Mary, we are in whole-hearted with God and ready pour out all that we have at his feet
 - Perhaps we are like the disciples- concerned for a friend who is beginning a time of trial
 - Who like Jesus, is staring into the unknown, and all you can do is be there, bear witness, and support them
 - Do we happen to see some of ourselves in Judas here, growing a little bitter with how things are going, and where they are going
 - Taking cheap shots that only increases the distance we feel
 - In need of a warming of the heart, in need of something to hope for
 - Maybe you are more like Jesus in this reading, preparing for the turmoil that is to come, tolerating no fools,
 - and grateful for the close contact and love of good friends
 - As Jesus and his disciples prepare for the week to come, as we prepare for our Holy Week
 - And as we consider our own lives and the changes that are in them
 - Let us hear the good news of God, proclaimed in Isaiah, and lived out in the life of Jesus
 - That God is now working on a new thing.
 - It now springs forth, do you not perceive it.
 - That God is there at each point in our lives working to make a way of hope
 - As the fragrance of change enters the air, we know that God is there just as strongly and pervasively.
 - Rejoicing with us, mourning with us, loving us, and making a way.

Amen.