
From fresh cut grass to fresh baked bread, from furniture polish to flowers, some smells are simply unmistakable. Smells have that unique ability to transport us back to another time or another place, to provoke nostalgia and emotions. Can there be anything that so easily does this other than our sense of smell?

As one of our five essential senses, smell is something we are greatly blessed with. Though in constant use, for most of the time we use it quite unconsciously, but it only takes the familiar scent of something to bring it into consciousness. Bishop Tom Wright says that smells have an uncanny ability to 'penetrate recesses of memory and imagination that the others senses can't get near'.

Genesis 1:27 states that 'God created man in his own image' so it shouldn't really surprise us that we share some of his characteristics. Let us look at how our sense of smell can not only enhance our daily lives, but also serve to heighten our sense and appreciation of God, of others, of ourselves, and also help us in reflecting something of his image. Our approach to this can be seen through four characters.

NOAH

Read Genesis 8:13-22

The time period from Genesis 7:11 to 8:14, means that Noah and his family were in the ark not only during the initial forty days and nights that it rained, but for well over a year. After being closed in with so many animals for such a lengthy time, we can hardly imagine the aroma that was created. Maybe this is one occasion when a sense of smell would not be such a blessing!

When eventually they are able to disembark, Noah builds an altar and makes a sacrifice to God, and 'The Lord smelled the pleasing aroma...' (Genesis 8:21). This was an act of worship in gratitude for their deliverance, an act that was pleasing to God.

Discussion

- Do we ever think of God having a sense of smell?
- How does that affect our perception of Him?

Read Hebrews 13:11-16

Discussion

Focus for a while on verse 15 of the above reading.

- When we pass through difficult times and by the grace of God come through them, how might we offer our gratitude to God?
- Do we think of that gratitude rising to God as a sweet aroma?

The offering of a 'sacrifice of praise' is foreshadowed by the sacrifices made in the tabernacle in the wilderness and during temple worship in Jerusalem. Here the aroma of the daily sacrifices and the use of incense were seen to ascend to God.

The request of the Psalmist (141:2) is 'May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice', and Revelation 8:4 says, 'The smoke of the incense, together with

the prayers of the saints, went up before God...' So our prayers can be as incense ascending to God. But the temple sacrifices were only a shadow of what was to come. The fulfilment was to come in Jesus who became for us the 'final sacrifice'.

Read Hebrews 9:23-28

Discussion

- How does our praying seem in the light of these passages and their picture of prayer? In what ways is this an encouragement to pray?

DAVID

Read 1 Samuel 16:1-13

God is not fooled by either appearance or aroma. In this record God sends Samuel to anoint David as king over Israel. Their first king, Saul, despite his impressive appearance (1 Samuel 9:2) was making a real mess of things, so God had already chosen his successor.

David's eldest brother, Eliab, also seems to have an impressive appearance, but God says to Samuel, 'Do not go by his appearance... the Lord does not look at the things man looks at... the Lord looks at the heart.' Earlier (1 Samuel 13:14) Samuel had rebuked Saul and said, 'The Lord has sought out a man after his own heart'.

The word 'heart' is used to indicate the genuine, motivating passion of David. Though imperfect, his desire is to reflect his Creator. He's someone we could say just 'smells' right.

Discussion

- When God looks at our heart, what do you think he sees? How does that make you feel? How should it affect the way we behave?
- As we look towards Easter, what things should make a 'sacrifice of praise' rise from our hearts as a 'sweet smelling aroma' of gratitude to God?

MARY

Read John 12:1-8

Smell can also be used as an analogy for atmosphere. Here in chapter 12 of John's Gospel Jesus arrives in the house of His close friends, Lazarus, Martha and Mary. It could have been a very calm domestic scene, but there is a certain tension in the air. Not only is the air about to be filled with a very heady fragrance, but the atmosphere is about to change too.

Mary may have been keeping this expensive perfume for this very occasion. Her action is an anointing in anticipation of Jesus' burial, yet it was more than that; it was an act of extravagant worship toward someone whom she loved very deeply. But her actions bring her into confrontation with Judas and in the

fragrance that permeated the room; an aroma of a very different kind was arising, a smell of criticism and judgement.

Discussion

- Possibly the suggestion of Judas in verse 5 was very sensible (although he had an ulterior motive, verse 6). After all, helping the poor is a good thing. So why does Jesus commend Mary for her extravagance? What is the lesson here for us?
- To make an extravagant offering in our praise and worship might not be understood or appreciated by some, even including our fellow worshippers. What's a good way to respond to this?

PAUL

Read 2 Corinthians 2:12-17

In the ancient world the sense of smell was highly valued, and the mention of 'the fragrance of the knowledge of him' linked with a 'triumphal procession' would have awakened several different associations in the minds of Pauls' readers. In verse 15 of our reading, a sharp distinction is made between the effect of the smell on 'those who are being saved and those who perishing'. This is preceded in verse 14 by reference to the 'triumphal procession'. Most people at this time would know about such processions as, when the military leaders of the day had won a notable victory, the whole city would welcome him and his troops as they came home. The prisoners would be put on display along with the plunder that had been taken, and among the various victory rituals was the practice of burning incense. It spoke to people of what was happening – that the victors could enjoy the rewards awaiting them but that the prisoners would soon meet their inevitable fate.

Paul's point is that as God's triumphal procession makes its way through the world following the victory of Jesus over sin and death, those following him are wafting the smell of victory, the smell of triumph, to the people around. To those who are responding to the gospel it means the smell of victory, joy, hope and peace. To those who reject the gospel and the victory of Jesus, it's the smell of their ultimate death warrant. Either way, it is this smell of victory that Paul says we emit.

Discussion

- Paul divides everyone he meets into one of only two categories: 'those who are being saved' and 'those who are perishing'. Do you believe this is still true today? If no, why not? If yes, what difference does it make to how you live?
- Paul feels unequal to the task of being a 'fragrance carrier' for Christ (verse 16). As we try to 'spread everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him' (verse 14) what resources and encouragements can we draw on?