

Reading: John 12:1-11

Theme: Filled with Fragrance

Back in 2012 Siân and I had the privilege to look after the MERF church work in Limassol in Cyprus for a few weeks. While walking the street where we stayed in the old part of Limassol – after it went a bit warmer - we’d walk past the orange trees planted in the street and the fragrance of the ripe oranges and the newly opened orange blossom was wonderful as it filled the street, especially in the warm sunshine. We’ll always associate that fragrance with Limassol. They do not have individual dustbins, but large communal bins every 100m or so for the households – emptied daily and these could stink and you could go from wonderful fragrance to a stench in a short distance!

We are going to look at a fragrance from some 2000 years ago, that should bring about thoughts of love and devotion to our minds and hearts. I want to use the letters of the word FRAGRANCE to look at the incident – mostly shorter points, some longer, so I need to get on:

Found – *where is it found?*

This incident is found in Matthew 26; Mark 14 and here in John 12 – I’ll make reference to these accounts to build up the fuller picture. Luke’s account in ch.7 is of a similar, but different incident. So, this incident is worth taking note of as it is found in 3 of the gospels.

Reconciling

John says it is on Saturday evening 6 days before Passover, while Matthew and Mark include it after Jesus spoke of there being 2 days to Passover. It is not a discrepancy, for Matthew and Mark include it in their accounts to put into stark contrast the love and devotion of Mary compared to the dark deeds of Judas and the

Jewish leaders. The event was 6 days before Passover, but Matthew and Mark give the time reference of the plotting of Jesus' enemies.

Anointing

Matthew tells us this event happened at Bethany in the home of Simon the leper i.e. Simon, who we assume, had been a leper and was healed by Jesus. Simon's family would have been there, Jesus and His 12 disciples, Lazarus, Mary and so too was Martha – serving and involved in the practical side of the evening. It was a meal of friends and those who had known great blessings from the Lord Jesus.

As the men reclined at tables for the supper, as was the custom of the day, so Mary approaches Jesus and breaks open this alabaster jar of very expensive perfume made from pure nard (John 12:3) – about a pint of it. This was very expensive and estimated to be about a year's salary for a labourer. In our terms we are talking of way over £20K – more expensive than Chanel No. 5 or most high street perfumes, some specialist brands sell for well over £100K, but that is for the fabulously rich! The point is that Mary wasn't using cheap stuff from off a market trader or the Lidl or Aldi of the day– only the best would do for this loving action on Jesus. From the accounts it seems she poured most of it on His head, but going head to toe. As we'd expect, the delightful fragrance filled Simon's home and no doubt drifted outside through the open windows for others to smell.

This action was a lavish, extravagant one at great cost to her and we can easily note that, but it will not impact us until we recognise it comes from a loving and thankful heart. It wasn't done for show or to impress, but was an action prompted by a heart that loved the Lord Jesus and Him alone, a heart that said "*Nothing is too much*

for Him!” This pouring out of the perfume goes along with her pouring out her heart’s holy and true love, thankfulness and appreciation. It involved humbling herself – to let down her hair in the presence of men was a scandalous thing to do, but she did what she did out a heart filled with love and would have done more beside.

Mary had many reasons to be thankful to and devoted to the Lord Jesus – she was a disciple, had come to believe and trust in Him; she, Martha and Lazarus were His friends and Mary had sat and listened carefully to Jesus’ teaching. She and Martha had gone to Jesus in their grief at Lazarus’ death and Jesus had done more than bring comfort to them, for He raised Lazarus from the dead after he had been dead for 4 days! Have no doubt, Mary loved the Lord Jesus with a holy passion, had great thankfulness of heart and anointed Him to express something of that.

This lavish action sprang from a thankful and loving heart. Would we do the same? Those of us who say we are Christians, do we have hearts full of love for our Saviour, this same Lord Jesus? What are we prepared to give to show our love and thankfulness to Him? Consider what He has done for us – both physically and especially spiritually. John Piper wrote *“Take a moment and look back on God’s fingerprints all over your life.”* I’m not hinting at giving more to the collection, or being involved in more church activities, but of doing things out of love and thankfulness for the Lord Jesus e.g. Matthew 25:40 *“The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’”* Mary’s loving action is a big challenge to our self-centred, comfortable Christian lives in which we can always find reasons not to do or be involved with people and things, because maybe missing is the motivation of costly, self-

sacrificing service out of love and devotion to our Saviour who has done so much for us.

If we are not a Christian or not sure, then maybe we are faced with something strange to our way of thinking and experience. To you Christianity may be about doing your best, following religious things, going through religious rites and rituals and so the idea of a love relationship with the Lord Jesus, with God the Son and through Him with God the Father, well that's too much, too fanatical and way out of your thinking and certainly your experience!

Yet the Bible shows us that being a Christian is about having and enjoying a real love relationship with God the Son and through Him, with God the Father. Our hearts are to be involved, so too are our emotions and these are to affect our lives, worship and service of God and work out in our dealings with others. When we come to know the Lord Jesus as our own Saviour, then our hearts, emotions, desires and love are all affected and we are to show it in so many ways.

Grumblers

Mary's action was love motivated, but straightaway there were grumblers, complainers, those who'd tut, tut. Her action is disapproved of and they justify their disapproval. It started with Judas – the treasurer of the group, as he quickly worked out that she'd used nearly a year's worth of a worker's wages on the fragrant perfume. He said it could have been given to the poor, but really he wanted access to the money as he put his hand in the bag for his own ends – he was a thief. Matthew and Mark tell us that the other disciples take up the grumbling chorus – it could have been sold and given to the poor.

These grumblers did not recognise the motive springing from a heart of love and devotion, which expressed itself in this way and so they grumbled, found fault and made their disapproval known. It is so easy to question or condemn people's actions and yet we may fail to see their motives are right and true. Their actions may seem lavish, but if their motives are true and their actions are allowable, then we should not grumble or find fault or complain, but examine our own hearts as to whether we'd be motivated by love for the Lord Jesus to do such things if we were able!

Their grumbling gives an indication of their little appreciation of the Lord Jesus at that moment "*Why this waste?*" (Matthew 26v8) Would they really begrudge and deny the Lord Jesus any good thing? No not really, but they were carried away with Judas' grumbling and complaining. We are to be careful of being influenced and carried away by the complaining and grumbling of others – it is so readily contagious! We can never waste anything that is given to the Lord Jesus – time, money, talents or lives. He is worth giving everything to and for – whether directly in His service or as we serve and help other people in whatever way.

We can be like the disciples and justify our grumbling in sound terms – they used charity and care for the poor, cold hearts covered with warm sounding words! (*Deep fried battered/breabcrumbed ice-cream*). Sadly, we can cover a critical spirit with words that sound so grand and spiritual, yet they arise from a hard heart. We are to learn from ones who do such kind and generous things. We are not to have a critical spirit, but see and learn of their heart. Yes, some have big hearts and soft heads and say or do things that are not wise or for the best, but even then, be generous in our assessment of them and criticize only when our love and zeal matches theirs in practical outworking.

Reproof

Jesus was aware of the grumbling and criticism of Mary's action and He reproves them "*Leave her alone*" and by saying this is approving of her action "*She has done a beautiful thing to me.*" (Matthew 26:10) They were grumbling and complaining, but He reproves them and their attitude – for He saw and still sees not as they or we see. In fact, He gives His:

Approval

He says she had done this good or beautiful thing = a thing of quality, a beneficial and beautiful thing in and of itself. Yes, it may have involved great cost, but Jesus' approval was not focused on that, but on the action which in and of itself was simple, for He saw the heart motive and how beautiful and good **that** was to Him. The Lord does not see as we see. In the temple one day as many were putting in large amounts of money and in a way that made heads turn and admire; but Jesus pointed out a poor old widow and commends her for putting in 2 small brass coins - not the value or even that it represented all she had, but that she gave from the heart. For a rich man to have put that amount in and profess to love the Lord would have been hypocritical, but Jesus knew this widow's love and devotion.

The Lord knows our love and motives, our reasons for service or lack of it. Some here wish they could do more and He knows and understands the circumstances that prevent them doing as they would. He also sees through the excuses we make not to do or to go or to say things in His service. He sees our hearts and their desires to serve Him and His people and not necessarily as we are free or able to do so.

Jesus said that they'd have the poor with them always – to do them good. Mary had realised that Jesus would soon be gone and so she

took a last opportunity to lavish this good upon Him – for the day of His burial (v7). How did she know? She had listened carefully to His teaching and that was used to convince her it was now or never. I don't think the disciples would have begrudged this to Jesus if they knew how close to death He was. A week later they do not say anything to hinder the women buying much to go and anoint His **dead** body! They felt it was no waste when He was dead! See Jesus' emphasis on this event in the:

Notice

Jesus says that this loving act would be noticed and mentioned wherever the gospel is preached (Matt 26:10 & Mark 14:9). The fragrance of her love generated action would be shed geographically worldwide and throughout all the ages. She didn't plan or expect that as she did this from a heart filled with love and devotion. The consequences of our simplest loving action are often far greater than we could ever imagine and they are noticed by our Lord Jesus as loving acts as if done personally Him!

Challenge

What a challenge to us and our love and devotion as we see that there was only one like Mary in the house in the company of the Lord Jesus, but sadly there was also one who'd so readily, easily and cheaply betray Him. Judas was there, one of the 12, had seen Jesus' miracles, heard Jesus' teaching; had even done amazing things himself and yet he went out and took money to betray Jesus! He sold Jesus for a low price, in fact the price of a maimed slave (Ex21:32) also the price prophesied of some 400 years previously (Zechariah 11:12-13). What a low value Judas set on Jesus and after all he'd heard and seen Jesus say and do. It is a challenge that in the same place, with Jesus present there could be people with such different hearts for and attitudes to the Lord Jesus and this leads to:

Enquiry

What value do we set on Jesus? How much do we think He is worth? What would cause us to sell out the Lord Jesus? Many have sold Him for a lot less than 30 pieces of silver – a smile, a sneer, an acceptance or a threat of rejection by friends or family; maybe a promise of something we want or a warning of being laughed at or to be accepted in our peer group, to have a good time with mates have caused some to deny or betray Jesus. Are we betraying Him by keeping quiet about Him as our Saviour and living as others do at work, school, in our sports and recreation?

For the gospel tells us that we whose lives are stench to God can be transformed into sweet aromas, fragrant to Him and we are made eternally acceptable in the Lord Jesus. He is the rose of Sharon, the lily of the valley and all He is and has accomplished is applied to our lives and is to affect our daily lives and be noticeable to others. We who have been rescued and saved for time and eternity by what He endured and went through on the cross; we surely should love Him dearly and desire to serve Him as we are able from full and loving hearts.

Amazing that 2 people so close to the Lord Jesus, but their hearts and lives were so different – one is a stench and does a despicable deed from a heart of deceitfulness and hatred; the other is fragrant and does a delightful deed from a heart of devotion and love. I wonder which one we are like. May our lives be lived as a fragrance, a sweet and pleasant aroma to the Lord and that others may detect Him because of us and we be an aroma of life to them.