

# Journey into Smell



Not only servicing the lungs, the air  
is woven, full  
of needles.

Archbishop Rowan Williams



**Smell is a potent wizard that transports us across thousands of miles and all the years we have lived.**

Helen Keller



## Starting the journey: what is smell?

### 'I smell, therefore I am'

When we breathe in, the air we pass through the receptors in our noses comes full of information about the world around us. Smells are literally everywhere. Like all gaseous substances, they expand to fill the space available to them: once released from an aerosol, a liquid fragrance will evaporate and then dissipate. 'Making sense' - of things and of people - really can be expressed as 'making scents'. The ability to smell is the one sense that connects more of ourselves with more of the world; smell continues to inform us even when our other senses can tell us little or nothing.

The ability to smell also confirms for us an intrinsic part of who we are, for we all have our own distinctive fragrance that subliminally identifies us to those whom we know and love. But our personal fragrance goes much deeper than that. We each have a smell that can only be masked, not eradicated cosmetically. At this level, our smell connects us with our loved ones, indeed our personal pheromones are apparently the basis of sexual attraction - which in this sense is quite literally 'personal chemistry'. To lose one's smell is to lose one's identity. Smells welcome us home, warn us of danger, and form some of the most powerful bonds between human beings. They evoke memories of times, places and experiences.

The smell of familiar places can be reassuring: we all know what home smells like, and if another person's home has smells that are radically different from our own we can feel uncomfortable in it. Too many smells can have the same unsettling effect - indeed, the experts say that we are unable to smell more than three fragrances in quick succession before confusion sets in.

### Smell within the creation

Within God's creation, smell has a particularly important part to play in how animals relate to each other and in how the food chain is connected. Many animals, of course, have a much more highly developed sense of smell than most humans, and can pick up scents on the wind that warn them of approaching danger or enable them to smell prey hiding away from them. Some animals have the ability to use smell intentionally, to ward off predators. It is not a good idea to frighten a skunk, for example. We have always known that dogs can smell much better than us. So we have exploited the capabilities of our dogs to use them to locate people and to sniff out dangerous and illegal substances. This extraordinarily enhanced smell world connects animals with changes in their environment over sometimes considerable distances: for example sharks can detect blood in the water at incredibly tiny concentrations. Smell is often the primary sense in very many animals seek out and find mates. The release of pheromones into the air triggers mating behaviour that overrides all other considerations. Smell, perfume and fragrance also figure in our own sexual attraction and behaviour, as perfume companies are all too aware.

**They haven't got no noses  
The fallen sons of Eve  
Oh, for the happy smell of water!  
The brave smell of a stone!**

G K Chesterton, *The Song of Quoodle*

Oliver Sacks tells the story of a medical student who, having taken drugs, discovered that his sense of smell was extraordinarily enhanced. Because of this he became aware of a whole new way of experiencing the world and of relating to it through his senses.

*'I went into a scent shop,' he continued. 'I had never had much of a nose for smells before, but now I distinguished each one instantly - and I found each one unique, evocative, a whole world.' He found her could distinguish all his friends - and patients - by smell: 'I went into the clinic, I sniffed like a dog, and in that sniff recognised, before seeing them, the twenty patients who were there. Each had his own olfactory physiognomy, a smell-face, far more vivid and evocative, more redolent than any sight face.' He could smell their emotions - fear, contentment, sexuality - like a dog. He could recognise every street, every shop, by smell - he could find his way around New York, infallibly, by smell.'*<sup>2</sup>

### The changing smells of life

Particular smells are intimately connected to who we are as human beings and there are particular smells which become deeply embedded in our memories about our creatureliness. For example, who can ever forget the distinctive smell of a newly-bathed baby? Is this the smell of incarnation? And what mother who has nursed her children will ever forget the pervasive smell of milk about her person, something that is perhaps troublesome at the time but is actually the smell of nurture. Children may find love and comfort in their own particular smell world and become distressed when their hygiene-conscious parents wash their favourite, much cuddled toy or blanket and make the calming, familiar smell of it disappear.

In heightened states of emotion, we give off and receive smells: 'the smell of fear' for instance. We react instinctively to the smell as much as the sight of blood, and during our lives we learn the smell of illness which emanates from the breath of a sick person and from the decomposing sweat of fevered skin. In looking after others, we instantly detect and react to alarming smells of illness, such as vomit and diarrhoea. Doctors often ask their patients if anything about their body smells different or unusual; forensic pathologists are aware that different smells can give clues as to how a person died.



**For your love is better than wine, your anointing oils are fragrant, your name is perfume poured out.**

Song of Solomon 1.2-3



The intimacy of love comes with its own set of special smells which are reinforced by closeness. This comes across in the scent imagery of the Song of Solomon.

If the one we love associates us with a particular perfume or fragrance, we are likely to wear it just for that person as a means of showing commitment and intimacy.



### REFLECTION POINT

Go through the Song of Solomon and note all the references to scent and perfume.

- ❖ How do these scent references remind us how wonderful human love is?
- ❖ How does this love poem of scents and fragrances remind us of God's love to us?
- ❖ Are there special scents and fragrances in your own relationships?



Death too, has its own particular smell and in former times when death was not as hidden away and sanitised as it is in our contemporary society, a family could often tell when a death was imminent by smell alone. John Drane writes:

*I remember becoming profoundly aware of this during a pastoral visit in Jamaica, when I was called to take the sacrament to an old man living alone in a remote spot in a wooden hut with no facilities, and in the final stages of a long illness. Though I had not known him previously, I could never forget the smell of death that lingered over him, even while still alive, and the consciousness that his personhood was diminished and would soon depart from his body.*



Bereaved people sometimes cling onto a piece of their deceased relative's possessions for the very reason that they can – at least for a time - preserve a sense of their presence, through lingering smell.

*He stretched out his hand and touched the smooth silk, the cloth, the muslin, the velvet, all those various textures. Stirred, the hanging folds gave out their perfume more strongly; he shut his eyes and inhaled her real presence. But what was left of her had been burnt, and the ashes were at the bottom of that pit in Lollington churchyard.<sup>3</sup>*



### ACTIVITY POINT

Walk around your house and find all the products you have which carry a particular fragrance. Do you have a preference for a particular set of smells in your house? On your clothes? On your body? Are there smells you don't like? Are there different smell signatures for other members of your family?



### Moving out: encountering God through smell

The Bible can help us begin to think about the place of smell in our personal spiritual journey as well as in our everyday life.

One of the things we don't often think about in studying and reflecting on scripture is how the different contexts must have smelled, even when the reference to smell is there. Often the smell of a situation contributes to the emotional content of the story, but we read intellectually and not with our senses fully engaged.

For example, in Genesis 27.27ff Jacob receives a blessing from his father Isaac in place of his brother Esau, because he is deliberately wearing his clothes:

**... he smelled the smell of his garments, and blessed him, and said, "Ah, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field that the Lord has blessed"**

The emotional content of the scene is important. A significant rite takes place, but because Isaac is old and blind, the event is unfolded through a smell picture. There is savoury food, the smell of Esau's hunter's garments. There must have been the smell of emotions too: Jacob is terrified of discovery. Yet there is reassurance, joy and

confidence in Isaac's mind as the familiar smell identifies the person with him as Esau, not Jacob. Yet so powerful is the smell picture that Isaac is tricked. With that reassurance comes the hoped for blessing.

One way of reading the Gospels might be to do so through the smells of different episodes. The nativity stories have an interesting mix: not only the smell of birth, but also of the shepherds and their sheep, and of the 'stable' (whether cave or stable, it would still have a distinctive fragrance). What must have the disciples smelled like, especially those who were fishing people? What would the centre of Jerusalem smell like? What would the prodigal have smelled like, living among pigs? What sort of smells accompanied the footwashing? What would Jesus himself have smelled like after riding the donkey or cooking the fish? What would his dead body have smelled like after it was embalmed with the spices?



### REFLECTION POINT

Can you think of places in your faith journey so far where a smell was important or significant in some way?

### God's fragrance

What does God have to tell us about the importance of fragrance? We can see that smell has a particular role to play in the relationship between human beings and God. We can see this in many traditions. In ancient Greece, the Pythia at Delphi inhaled the fumes of burning laurel, Apollo's own tree, before going into her prophetic trance. In the Bible the smoke of burning spices and scented ingredients moves upwards and its motion and scent together create a sense of connection, as does prayer, between earth and heaven. The scent itself is supposed to concentrate our minds on what is holy and transcendent, to lift our thoughts beyond the mundane.

### Smell offers a glimpse of something transcendent

If we think about our ability to smell in terms of our spiritual journey, we can see that the power of smell can make connections between the world we encounter as we breathe and the work of God within it. What kinds of smell help us to focus our hearts and minds on God and how can we use such smell to inform the way we try to share our faith with others?

There was certainly a consciousness in the Hebrew Scriptures that smell could have a transcendent dimension. The burning of incense was an ancient cultic practice, which the people of Israel probably took over from the Canaanites and we find it in the Bible as a feature of ritual:

**You shall make an altar on which to offer incense...Aaron shall offer fragrant incense on it; every morning when he dresses the lamps he shall offer it; a regular incense offering before the Lord throughout your generations.** Exodus 30.1:7-8

### Whence is that goodly fragrance blowing?

French carol



### Incense and oil

Similarly, we read the following instructions about holy anointing oil and making the special incense in the same chapter of Exodus:

*The Lord spoke to Moses: Take the finest spices: of liquid myrrh five hundred shekels, and of sweet-smelling cinnamon half as much, that is two hundred and fifty, and two hundred and fifty of aromatic cane, and five hundred of cassia – measured by the sanctuary shekel – and a hin of olive oil; and you shall make of these a sacred anointing oil blended as by the perfumer; it shall be a holy anointing oil.*

*The Lord spoke to Moses: Take sweet spices, stacte (an oil of myrrh), and onycha (a spice from a mollusc found in the Red Sea), and galbanum (an aromatic resin from Asiatic plants), sweet spices with pure frankincense (an equal part of each), and make an incense blended as by the perfumer, seasoned with salt, pure and holy;...when you make incense according to this composition, you shall not make it for yourselves; it shall be regarded by you as holy to the Lord. Whoever makes any like it to use as perfume shall be cut off from the people.' Exodus 30:22-5; 34-5; 37-8.*

What we learn from this is that there is a distinctive smell associated with holiness and with offering. When the people encounter the distinctive smell, they will know that they are in a holy place and among holy things. They will be encouraged to think about God. The instructions carry the sense of the preciousness of the oil and incense and the precise instruction that it is to be set apart from fragrances used in everyday life. It is not surprising then, that the precious gifts offered to the new-born Son of God are gold, frankincense and myrrh. When we re-enact the nativity stories in churches and schools, so we think to include the richness of the perfume that tells us we stand in the holy presence?

One of the challenges to us then is to think about how we recover the 'scent of holiness' with which to attract those searching for God. Certainly some Christians continue to use incense in their worship, but how far does the smell of incense tell people that something transcendent is happening/has happened here? When we use oil in the sacraments, does the idea, so present in Exodus, that the scent of it should lift our hearts to heaven, really come across? Perhaps we should also take careful note that in the Hebrew Scriptures misusing the precious and holy incense and oil is a source of God's anger and disappointment as we see in Isaiah 1.13 and in Ezekiel 16.18 where the image is of using the perfume to prostitute oneself. If we are going to use fragrance in worship and use it to witness to others, then we have to treat it with the seriousness it deserves and not in frivolous or complacent ways.



### REFLECTION POINT

Could the worship in your church be more 'fragrant'? Are there creative ways to use smell to set people's hearts on God?





## Journey beyond smelling: smell and loss



We all know that when we have a blocked nose with a cold and can't smell properly that the world seems flat and diminished. A particular problem with not being able to smell is that food becomes less appetising. Our ability to enjoy the world and interact with it is reduced or lost. The loss of the ability to smell therefore can shut down some avenues of spiritual perception and growth.

However, smell is important in other areas of loss and disability. For example, reminiscence therapy, using smell, is used to help people with Alzheimers disease remember events and evoke memories. In helping people get through difficult times in their lives, or through particularly stressful situations, perhaps we too could do more to use smell to evoke hope, happy memory or peace.

There is a connection here with the renewed search for an 'embodied' theology and spirituality. Floyd Schaffer is a Lutheran priest in the USA, and a clown. He tells the story of how one day he celebrated the Eucharist as a clown, and included a 'flashpot' which evidently blew up with a puff of smoke at some point during the service. The intended liturgical purpose of this is not altogether clear, but one man in his congregation saw and smelled the smoke, and recognized it right away. To him, it was the smell of war, and in that instant he was taken back to the battlefield where so many of his friends had died. The connection on that occasion between this somewhat unusual smell of the Eucharist, and his life experience, became sacramental for him in new ways as he appreciated the relevance of the death of Christ in relation to his own prior experience.



### PRAYER POINT

Lord God,  
You walk in all our memories  
You know where we have been  
What we have said, known and felt.  
Come to us in the scent we remember  
The time when we walked with you  
And know that we walk with you still  
Amen



## The double spiral: what do others smell?

Smell is intrinsic to who we think we are. The advertising industry pours millions into persuading us to buy cosmetics in order to ensure that at all times we will smell wonderful and alluring, encouraged by the evidence of our own self-consciousness, which tells us that we *do* smell different at the end of a long meeting in an unventilated environment than we do when we have just stepped out of the shower. In department stores there is often a number of staff offering you the chance to test different smells,

and sometimes shoppers go that section just to spray a few lovely scents on themselves, not to buy anything. You can tell when you are approaching *Lush* from a considerable distance away. There are deodorants for every part of the body that might develop strong personal smells and anti-perspirants to stop smell formation in its tracks. The perfect body of the adverts not only looks good, it also always smells good. For many people their spiritual journey includes the pursuit of the lovely fragrance. Personal fragrances therefore sometimes have 'spiritual' names such as *Eternity*. This spirituality is reinforced by descriptions of the fragrances as being drawn from the sweet smells of nature, such as 'A fresh woody fragrance with notes of Bergamot, Lavender, Neroli and Amber'. And there is some evidence that by changing our smell we can indeed change how we feel about ourselves, and alter our moods. This is the basis of aromatherapy, with its use of essential oils to enable us to engage with our innermost beings, and to be empowered to be the best we can be. For many people, aromatherapy as given by a practitioner, or used at home, is an important way of getting rid of stress, relaxing, feeling good and opening the mind. Here is one description of the essential oils used in aromatherapy, which some therapists claim offers the possibility of being propelled into altered states of consciousness.

Essential oils have been used in healing since ancient times. They are found in different parts of the plant: petal (rose), leaves (eucalyptus), and roots of grass (vetiver), heartwood (sandalwood), and resin (frankincense). Often referred to as the 'life force' of plants, these oils have within them the unique complex properties of that plant in a concentrated form that can help the body holistically to heal itself. Through aromatherapy and using the essential oils we can improve both our emotional and physical health. The skin absorbs essential oils; therefore, massage is a very effective way of introducing them into the body. All essential oils are anti-bacterial, anti-viral or anti-fungal. Research has shown that aroma affects our emotional senses. This is because the olfactory nerves pass directly from the nose to the limbic system – the emotional centre of the brain. It is always important to enjoy the smell of the essential oil that we are using, as this will give us emotional balance.<sup>4</sup>





Aromatherapy uses the same scents that are important in scripture as a means of describing holiness and God's presence. The use of herb oils repeats the medicinal herb gardens of religious communities. What then do we have to do to re-establish the connections between the fragrances that are being used as a feel-good practice to gain 'emotional balance' and the pathway to God?

We are encouraged to extend this wonderful smell into our homes and belongings. Far from the odd joss stick, scented candles are particularly popular, as are perfume sticks and bottles which you can stand around the home or plug into an electric socket to scent your home. You must also seek out and destroy unpleasant smells, spraying your furniture and eradicating tobacco or animal smells. The toilet is a particularly sensitive area, with adverts saying worryingly 'what does your loo say about you?' and, more directly 'Pooh! That smells really bad!' You can add scented fabric conditioners to your clothes and put lavender scented water in your iron. The way your house smells says something about your personality to your visitors. For many people, the scent of their environment is also a reflection of their spiritual search for peace and joy. Do we ever take proper account of this when we visit friends and neighbours and engage with them about it?

### ACTIVITY POINT

**Have a look round a chemist, supermarket or department store, or visit a shop selling aromatherapy oils. Try out some of the fragrances. Which ones, if any, connect to your own spiritual experiences and why?**

**Choose one fragrance in any form (such as a herb cushion) and use it as a background to meditation and prayer or bible study. See later whether the scent is enough to remind you of what you have been praying about or studying and to bring your mind to God.**



Another way in which smell plays a part in people's spiritual journeys is where people seek out the smells of different locations. Restaurants and cafes may become spiritual homes for people because of their welcoming smells and people may be attracted to particular holiday destinations because their smells speak of 'paradise'. Different locations around the world certainly do have different smells. The fragrance of eucalypts in Australia or California is different from the smell of poverty, pollution, and smog that meets the visitor in cities like Metromanila in the Philippines or Mumbai in India. A western urban center like London or New

**Tourists can now sniff out their perfect trip by wearing a virtual reality headset that emits evocative smells of a destination. The first 3D sensory tour is of Egypt and includes the smells of herbs and spices at a market and the musty aroma of a Pharaoh's tomb. Thompson Holidays, which is offering the new service, said it allowed customers 'to try before they buy'.**

*Metro, Friday November 12<sup>th</sup> 2004.*

York smells different again, while the gentle fragrances of rural Jamaica or Hawaii after a shower of rain evoke their own distinctive atmosphere. The rich north smells different from the poor south, and the Arctic Circle different from the equator.

### REFLECTION POINT

**Can you think of places you have visited, or holidays you have taken that have left you with a distinctive smell impression? What do you think 'paradise' smells like?**

**How might we make the connection for people when talking with them about favourite places, honeymoons or holidays?**



**She put her handkerchief to her nose. But the sharp rasping smell of the carcasses leaked through the barrier of perfume, superimposing itself upon the sweetness, so that a respiration that began with *Quelques Fleurs* would hideously end with dead sheep or, opening in stale blood, modulated insensibly into the key of jasmine and ambergris.<sup>5</sup>**



### The evil stench

We associate bad or evil things with noisome smells, and stench. Hell was traditionally associated with the smell of brimstone – sulphur dioxide, the smell of rotten eggs. The presence of evil has often been associated with a foul odour, although Nietzsche also denounced the 'bad odour' of the Judeo-Christian tradition. The fragrance of holiness has always been contrasted with the smell of evil and perversion.

Smell, then, can call us to our duty as Christians to reconcile and transform the world. In former times, the privileged would carry a pomander – an orange stuck with cloves to ward off the noisome smell of a world without sewage disposal and treatment facilities<sup>6</sup>. So even today, how many people will stand on a tube train rather than sit next to the homeless person who smells bad because he has no other clothes to wear? Bad smells remind us of those whom God asks us to lift up from their oppression and set free. Being set free changes the smells they have access to and which they give out. So when we help those who are addicted to different substances, we set them free from the prevailing smell of the thing that has trapped them: the smell of alcohol, the smell of drugs, the smell of glue, the smell of prostitution. That work to set people free also requires that they become able to endure the smell of those addictions without finding them compelling. This may be true in our own lives if we are trying to cut down or give up addictions. A non-smoker will say that a heavy smoker smells like an ashtray, but the smoker will find the smell of a cigarette entirely wonderful. In giving up addictions, people may find the smell of tobacco, or alcohol sets off their craving, so have to helped to look for and enjoy other smells more than these. Where we encounter people dealing with the smell of

tobacco or alcohol, we can learn from them more about the smell challenges in our world. There is a smell of poverty, of famine, of sickness and of death in war and conflict. We are called as Christians to endure those smells and transform them into liberation, healing and peace and teach those around us what those abstract concepts really smell like, so that they become not just ideals, but a concrete reality. We can learn much from the stories of those involved in mission agencies of what it means to transform those smells and work to overcome them.



### PRAYER POINT

Lord God,

In the stink of rubbish tips where people make a living  
 In the stench of graves where people search for their dead  
 In the foul odour of disease where people are suffering  
 You are there  
 You are the fresh air.

Help us to make lives for the scavengers of rubbish  
 Help us to bring justice for the unknown dead  
 Help us to nurse and heal the diseased.

Help us to bring your fresh new life to the world  
 Amen

Jesus has taught us to transform that which is signified by evil stench into the fragrance of a new creation. For example,

*“Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, “Take away the stone”. Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” So they took away the stone...*

*The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go”.* John 11.38-44

Despite the smell of the rotting corpse, God’s grace and healing power can bring transform what is broken and dead into what is truly alive. In Christian tradition, it is also often reported that holy women and men exude a sweet smell which overcomes the smell of death, so the fragrance becomes a sign of their victory over evil through their faith. For example, St Lawrence is said to have been martyred by roasting over a gridiron, but the smell of his burning flesh was replaced by a sweet smell instead. The bodies of other holy women and men are said to smell sweetly, as of roses, or violets, instead of smelling of putrefaction. Some appearances of the Virgin Mary as reported by those who have witnessed them, have included a sweet fragrance. This tradition is perhaps a sign of our task to rid the world of its ‘bad smelling’ evil



and overcome it with the ‘good smell’ of transforming and reconciling lives.

As partners with God, we too must not be put off by the evil stench of corruption, but become witnesses to this same transforming power. This does not have to be some vast humanitarian project. Just helping an elderly or sick person clean their home, tidy their garden, wash their dog’s dirty and matted fur, or do some washing and ironing for someone unable to do it for themselves can help to bring smell of God’s love, care and concern into their lives.



### ACTIVITY POINT

**Have a walk round your local area. Where are the ‘bad’ smells in your own community? Where might you expect to encounter such bad smells? What could be done to change things?**

.....



### The spirals entwined: the fragrance of others

Smell evokes memories

*... he found the sun-warmed skin impregnated with a faint yet penetrating smell, at once salty and smoky, a smell that transported him instantaneously to a great chalk pit in the flank of the Chilterns, where, in Brain Foxe’s company, he had spent an inexplicably pleasurable hour striking two flints together and sniffing, voluptuously, at the place where the spark had left its characteristic tang of marine combustion.*

*“L-like sm-moke under the s-sea,” had been Brian’s stammered comment when he was given the flints to smell.’*

We all have smells that connect us to particular memories. Perhaps the most famous example is the way the smell of the Madeleine dipped in a cup of tea, recalled Marcel Proust to his childhood and every detail of a past life. The smell of freshly-mown grass, can evoke images of hard but rewarding work, or perhaps of lazy days spent in the park or countryside. The smell of the seaside, or of summer flowers might easily connect with idyllic childhood experiences. Or, more prosaically, the smell of polished furniture, or shoes, of washing and ironing, of new paint, of popcorn at the cinema, of the swimming pool – or of petrol or screenwash in the car, or the smell of the mechanic who services it ... we all have our own stories.

Smell makes us aware of our surroundings, and produces many different emotions – fear, anticipation, expectation, happiness. All these things contribute to who we are and the stories which make up our personal narrative. They can also connect us with our fragility. Crime victims can sometimes identify their attackers by reference to





their distinctive smell. We all intuitively recognize a smell that is ‘not quite right’ – electrical smells that warn of possible danger, or the smell of a hospital. In fact, health and illness have many different fragrances associated with them. The burns unit of a hospital has a different smell from the maternity ward, while many healing medications also have a distinctive smell.

In a poll to discover people’s favourite smells had these results:

- More than 25% roast dinner (traditional Sunday lunch)
- 12% coffee
- barbecue 10%
- mulled wine 2%
- gingerbread 2%
- popcorn 2%
- cut grass 6%
- honeysuckle 7%



Chef Richard Cawley said that the aroma of oven cooking took people back to more authentic times. ‘I would have voted for the Christmas tree but it’s great that so many people voted for the fabulous food smells.’<sup>8</sup>

What is interesting about this is the association with more ‘authentic’ times as the chef put it. The Sunday dinner was once as much part of the ‘day of rest’ as churchgoing. The mulled wine and the Christmas tree are part of the special smell of Christmas. We could perhaps pay more attention to the lovely smells associated with special times in the church calendar.

This poll also suggests that we, and all those others we encounter, inside and outside the Church, have common smell memories which we can share as part of our journey of mutual discovery of the world and all that is in it. This opportunity, beginning from a place of common experience, may allow us not only to speak of how smell leads us to God but we may also be surprised to learn where others have encountered God’s presence through smell. What does the sheer pleasure of smelling something nice say about God? Eleanor Farjeon wrote ‘praise for the sweetness of the wet garden’ in her hymn *Morning is Broken*. What is the link from our smell memories to praising God? Perhaps the proper place for us to end up in our exploration of smell is in love and praise.

### REFLECTION POINT

**What smell memories, good or bad, do you have that would resonate with others? How could those memories be used to begin to listen to other’s stories of the spiritual journey and to share our faith?**



**Inside the church was an ancient darkness, smelly with centuries of rustic piety. Anthony took two breaths of that sweet-stale air, and felt his midriff heave with a qualm of disgust.**<sup>9</sup>

## Using smell: journeying into Christian tradition

### What does your church smell like?

What our churches smell like matters. For example, in the visitors book for 2004 in the small church of St John the Evangelist, Countisbury, Devon – to take just one example – there are a number of comments, such as ‘impressive smell’, ‘smell of polish’ and ‘smell – warm and welcoming’. Conversely, the smell of dampness, musty paper, mould, ancient books or decaying flowers may create an impression of Church that is deeply off-putting to visitors and enquirers. The smell of a church that is loved and cared for can indicate to people that Christians are putting energy into their place of worship because this is a place where they meet the living God. So how can we work on what kinds of smell people encounter when they enter a church and what kinds of smell will help them encounter God’s presence?

**‘Oh, I do admit,’ cried Mrs Amberley, ‘that a village congregation on a wet Sunday morning – well, frankly, it stinks! Deafeningly! But still...’**  
**‘It’s the odour of sanctity,’ put in Anthony Beavis.... ‘I’ve suffered from it myself.’**<sup>10</sup>

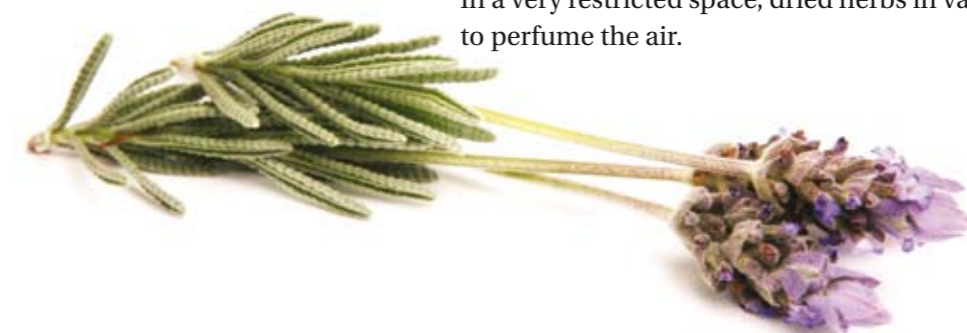


### ACTIVITY POINT

**Go to your own place of worship and concentrate on what it smells like. What do you like or dislike about the smell? Is it comfortable, familiar and pleasing, or are there things you would like to change or put right? What would a stranger make of the smell of your church and what might they want to write in the visitors’ book?**

**What do other places of worship in your area smell like? Do you know what the worship centres of people of other faiths smell like?**  
 .....

Since many people outside Christian tradition like to visit our churches, we could start with the smells of the environment outside the church building. The smell of new-mown grass in a churchyard speaks of love and care as well as evoking pleasant memories. Traditionally, religious communities often kept herb gardens for cooking and medicinal purposes and so the fragrant smells of lavender, sage and rosemary, associated with feeding and healing permeated the place of religious experience. Perhaps it would be possible to make a herb garden, or bring scented herbs, even in pots, into the church environment, so that people begin to make these connections with Church rather than something that is used in the home or to enhance private spiritual reflection. In a very restricted space, dried herbs in various forms could be enough to perfume the air.



## Inside the church

If the church is the house of God, how do people know that this house is loved and cared for? The smell of polish or other cleaning products can speak powerfully to people of the activity of those who love this place and may prompt them to wonder why it is so loved. The smell of flowers is as evocative as it is in a home. Many faithful people give up their time to keep the church clean; perhaps more attention to be given to how their job provides a witness to Christian faith.

Similarly, it costs huge amounts of money for the upkeep of many historic church buildings, but perhaps there needs to be consideration of whether a 'bad' smell in a church in need of repair is preventing appreciation of other essential work that is being done. What priority should be given to making historic buildings smell more attractive to people?

## Church facilities

More and more churches today have kitchens, toilets and 'living' areas for community groups. What do their smells say to people whose spiritual journeys bring them out of curiosity to the church door? What does it say to people if they can smell coffee or fresh bread in our place or worship, or if our toilets have a welcoming, fresh smell?



**John Drane writes:** At the start of my ministry I worked a lot with Chinese Christians. A typical Sunday service could last for anything up to three or four hours, and it would then be followed by a Chinese meal. One of the things we all looked forward to was the point when the smell of the food would invade the sanctuary, and signal that now was the time for community engagement. Though there was never this intention, I have often reflected on how closely that experience must have paralleled the experience of worshippers in the ancient temple at Jerusalem, where the smell of cooking food must have lingered everywhere in the atmosphere in much the same way as it does in some Asian temples today.



## Summary of the journey: where have we been?

This chapter has asked what it means to have the gift of smell and how that gift connects us intimately to the world around us, to each other, and to God.

- ❖ Smell is an important part of our existence as creatures, bringing us information about our environment, confirming ourselves as unique beings with our own individual smell and linking our selves with our history milestones in our lives and our memories in a powerful way. As such, smell can therefore be an integral part of our spiritual journey and walk with God.
- ❖ Smell forms an important background to scripture, but it is one which we often ignore. People's experience is often richly steeped in the experience of smell in the biblical stories and informs the context and we need to become more aware of this, because it also connects with the smell experiences we, and people outside the Church, have in our own lives.
- ❖ Scripture also tells us that there is a link between smell, holiness and transcendence, such that the special fragrances of incense and oil can connect us to proper worship of God. How do we make people aware of that special connection in a society that is fascinated by perfume and fragrance, but is only dimly aware of its spiritual power in worship and sacrament?
- ❖ People outside the Church increasingly turn to fragrance for therapeutic reasons and to make statements about themselves and their environment. How can we understand what they are telling us by their scent choices and how can we make connections between the therapies and practices and the search for spiritual fulfilment?
- ❖ How does a greater awareness of the significance of smell in our own spiritual journey reveal to us the 'bad' smell of the world's inequality and injustice and how can we work to reconcile and transform it as a witness to others?
- ❖ How does the relation of smell to memory allow reflection on where God has been at work in our lives and how we may see God as having worked in the lives of others? What common smell memories allow us to share and learn from each other's stories?
- ❖ What do our churches smell like? And is that smell an invitation to explore and journey further, or is it off-putting to the spiritual seeker?



### MEDITATION POINT

For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance of life to life'. 2 Corinthians 2:15-6