

Fragrance

September 21, 2018 by [Alison Kings](#)

<https://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/articles/fragrance/>



Yes, Paradox/flickr

This is a revised version of an address given originally to a women's group in the Diocese of Salisbury in 2011, then to the Ordinands Conference at Lee Abbey, Devon, in 2012 and the Diocese of Clogher, Church of Ireland clergy conference in 2013.

Introduction

Have you ever noticed a smell triggering a memory in you? Hyacinths, new carpets, salt in the sea air, autumn leaves, and the perfume Cristalle are scents I love. What about you? Sitting at a local café in Dorset, I experienced a strong

memory of my grandmother, who had died over 40 years earlier. Someone had walked by who smelt like her. What was this sweet fragrance composed of? Cheap soap, stale cigarettes, and love.

I started going to church as a 16 year old, joining the choir soon afterwards. I chose this church, like the good Anglican I was yet to become, because it was there. I find it very moving that here in Britain there is always a church to which you belong even if you are not in the slightest bit interested. Someone has the “cure of souls” in the parish in which you live. I loved the symbolism of the incense which was a regular part of Sunday worship. To me it represented the prayers of the people ascending to God, pervading the atmosphere of the entire building. Imagining the smell now, I think of it as an amazing image of how, if you bring yourself to a holy place, you cannot help but breathe God in, whatever the state of your mind or will.

‘Fragrance’ has multiple, and not always positive, meanings. It is not all Chanel No 5.

To develop this further, I will be exploring the concept of ‘Fragrance’ in six themes: Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians; Good Friday and Easter; Brokenness and Renewal; Odour of Sanctity; Senses and Sensing; Children and Animals.

2 Corinthians Chapter 2

Paul mentions ‘fragrance’ in his second letter to the church he founded at Corinth:

But thanks be to God, who continually leads us as captives in Christ’s triumphal procession, and uses us to spread abroad the fragrance of the knowledge of himself! We are indeed the incense offered by Christ to God, both among those who are on the way to salvation, and among those who are on the way to destruction: to the latter it is a deadly fume that kills, to the former a vital fragrance that brings life. (2 Corinthians 2:14-16, REB)

In looking at earlier verses in this chapter to get a sense of context, I was struck by a message about someone who had done wrong and been in trouble with the community, but who has now suffered enough:

The penalty on which the general meeting has agreed has met the offence well enough. (verse 6)

Even more than a public penalty, a major part of our punishment is so often our own shame and remorse. Paul writes that it is time for forgiveness and the reaffirmation of love which follows on:

Something very different is called for now: you must forgive the offender and put heart into him; the man's distress must not be made so severe as to overwhelm him. (verse 7)

Hear these words of comfort, if you have worries and troubles of your own, or things you are feeling guilty about.

We know that the odour issuing from death is different from the odour issuing from life. The one speaks of decay and corruption, the other of life and growth. So what is this about us being the incense offered by Christ to God among those who are on the way to salvation, and among those who are on the way to destruction?

It is about two perspectives on who Jesus is. Those who are "on the way to salvation" are those who know, or have an intimation, or are trying to know, that the Christ they smell through us, is alive and incorruptible. Those who are "on the way to destruction" are those who believe, or assert, or live out the implication, that Jesus is dead, and so they smell the decay of a dead body.

The difference is this: if a person hears someone talk about Jesus, they either think of Jesus as dead or living. To any given hearer (or smeller) the same person is a dead Jesus or a living one. Verse 16 puts it like this:

To the latter it is a deadly fume that kills, to the former, a vital fragrance that brings life.

We, made in the image of God, have the same scent as Jesus. If you are someone who is sure that Jesus is alive today, your fragrance should be sweet. However, our theoretical knowledge does not always reach the darkest parts of ourselves, and we may have some uncertainties about whether we do smell good.

Sometimes, if we are honest, we realise that we have done something, thought or said something, or left something undone, which leaves us thinking "that stinks!" However, remember that our God believes in doubt. Not that God wants us to be unsure or wobbly, but that God likes us to ask questions, to explore, to push the boundaries as we try to work out who God is, and who we are ourselves, and who we are in relation to so different a being as God. God is with us when we are unsure or wobbly, because God likes us to be honest. And, to be honest, who has not had moments (at least) of doubt?

Where this passage helps us in this context is the assertion that we are the incense offered by Christ to God. Paul is using sacrificial language. God smells us, and the scent is of Christ. It is the very nature of our salvation that we smell of Life, not of Death. Though our sins were as rotting flesh, Christ did not cover up the stink, but has transformed the decay into the sweetest of herbs. The fact

is that we cannot be anywhere in between, even though we may think we probably smell reasonably OK, a reasonable amount of the time. To God we are just lovely. We are the younger sisters and brothers, no less delightful to the Father than the First Born.

Good Friday and Easter

The scene of death is paradoxically a scene and source of life. This is supremely so in the Christian faith, as we know through the strange name of Good Friday, which is probably the only Christian Holy Day that has not got a place in the modern world outside the Christian tradition.

Remember those women who followed Jesus to his crucifixion. The smells must have been powerful: dust, sweat, blood, fear, and death. Remember Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus who prepared Jesus' body for the grave. How sweet and bitter those smells of myrrh and aloes must have been. Remember the women preparing spices and perfumes to anoint the body. How they must have wept as the perfumes lived with them through that dark Sabbath Saturday, and as they carried them to the tomb on the Sunday morning. They would have been expecting to find a body which had begun to smell of decay.

And then – life! How disconcerting. Everything turned upside down. Like those Chagall paintings where the heads of people are the wrong way up, or their feet are not on the ground, death and new life have confused and changed everything.

We know this also in our everyday life. After bereavement, a loss of someone or of something, new opportunities open up. Out of the grief, horror, and suffering comes an imperative to find a new way of living. It seems to us an insult, to have to go on living after losing our life partner, a child, a parent, or a beloved friend. But the challenge is to find life after death. How hard that must have been when the women went to the grave expecting decay, and met only fresh dawn air, an angel (I wonder what angels smell like?) and the continuing perfume of their no-longer-needed ointments.

Brokenness and Renewal

Thomas Moore, the 18th century poet, ended his poem, 'Farewell':

You may break, you may shatter the vase if you will,

But the scent of the roses will hang round it still.

Brokenness is not always unequivocally a disaster.

St Catherine's Chapel is set on the hill above Abbotsbury, in Dorset. It is a beautiful ancient stone building overlooking Chesil beach and the sea. I was

there a few years ago for a summer evening service, and was entranced on entering the porch to find that I was walking on sprigs of rosemary. This gave way to a scent of the lavender with which the whole chapel had been strewn for a wedding earlier that afternoon. So the participants enjoyed not only the scent of the herbs, rising to meet us as we entered for worship, but also the sweet savour of a local wedding, which had left traces of its essence on the air.

Marjoram grew in our garden in Dorset. After moving in, a year of not-so-attentive-gardening left the marjoram free to spread into the lawn. Imagine my delight at finding that, quite against expectations, not only did the lawn look fine, but when I walked on it the scent of the herbs rose to meet me. There are always new delights to be experienced.

The truth is, that our best and our worst features often emerge at the time of most stress. Think of what happens when we are ill. You may have experienced someone getting ratty and demanding. You may have experienced someone being concerned for others and full of gratitude for the care they are receiving. Both attitudes may have been present in the same person. How much more willing are we to forgive the bad times when that person apologises and thanks us? The odour of sanctity can evaporate the stink of sin.

Odour of Sanctity

You probably know the phrase “the odour of sanctity”. Part of the history of this is the myth that the bodies of the saints did not decay, and that if their tombs were opened, there would issue forth a beautiful smell, thus confirming their sainthood. This is told, amongst others, of St Margaret who hid Catholic priests from persecution towards the end of the 16th century.

In the novel *Home*, by Marilynne Robinson, the errant Jack Boughton comes home to his ageing father, a retired minister, where his sister, Glory, is caring for him, following sorrows of her own. The family has grappled since Jack’s childhood with the question of whether Jack is saved, and can be forgiven his persistent misdoing. Jack in his poverty is very short of clothes:

Glory thought the shirts her father had worn before he began to lose weight and height were no doubt in the attic... She found them in a cedar chest, laundered and ironed as if for some formal event, perhaps their interment. They had changed to a color milder than white, and there was about them, besides the smell of time and disuse, of starch and lavender and cedar, a hint of Old Spice that brought tears to her eyes. ...

She offers them to Jack

He stepped back and smiled. “What is that? Cedar? Starch? Lilies? Candlewax? Isn’t the phrase ‘the odor of sanctity’? I would not presume.”

She said, “I’m pretty sure the odor of sanctity will come out in the wash,” and he laughed. “I’ll try the effects of detergent and sunshine and then I’ll ask you again.”

Marilynne Robinson, *Home* (Virago, 2008) p.98

Jack is afraid to claim spiritual consanguinity with his holy (earthly) father, even to the extent of wearing his old shirts. How familiar that feeling is, of being undeserving alongside a more “spiritual” person, let alone alongside God. Jack is scrupulously honest in his sense of not living up to the standards set for him by himself and by his meticulously Protestant community. He is trapped, in a way, by his culture which, however hard his father tries to forgive him, persists in its assertion of his ongoing sinfulness.

The phrase ‘odour of sanctity’ is often used disparagingly, by those who think that sanctity is about restrictive rule-keeping and rigid moralism. This attitude is a reaction to a perceived Christianity which cannot cope with questions, with doubt. Christians sometimes suffer comments that imply that their Christian standards make them prigs.

Yet there is another meaning to the ‘odour of sanctity’. We are often not expecting it when we come across it - that is the way it is with smells - but suddenly we are struck by something. It may be in the way a friend is with us, or when something someone does transforms our perception of them. A homeless person calls after us in the street, and, against our expectations, hands us the wallet we have just dropped. We see the person, the humanity, behind the stereotype. Do you remember the television advert where a “hoodie” is running up behind a businessman? The viewer imagines impending danger...but what follows is different.

We realise that the other person is, in that moment, revealing their humanity, and in that moment we sense - or scent - God.

Senses and Sensing God

Rowan Williams contributed a *haiku* on smell to an intriguing book, *Sense Making Faith*:

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

Rowan Williams in Anne Richards, *Sense Making Faith: Body, Spirit, Journey* (Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, 2007), p.42.

We have an amazing range of senses available to us, with always more to be found, if we have the desire and courage to pursue them. We sense the presence of God in a person, in a room, in a building, or in nature. We are used to acknowledging some senses more than others. We see glorious autumn colours and we hear exquisite music. We are moved by the touch of a hand, or delight in the breeze on our face. We smell the Sunday roast and then enjoy the taste of it.

We sense through our bodies, having a gut feeling we are going to get on with a new acquaintance, or having a shiver of anticipation when our lover walks through the door. I hope you remember that, and sometimes recapture it. I hope you have had that experience, even if your desire was never fulfilled.

In relationships or not, these tingles of excitement come in other contexts too. Roald Dahl's *BFG* describes it in the hearing of music:

Sometimes human beings are very overcome when they are hearing wonderful music. They are getting shivers down their spindles.

Roald Dahl, *The BFG* (Puffin, 2007) p. 98.

Have you ever felt the Holy Spirit as a physical sensation? I had a friend whose husband commented to her that he thought they sat in a draughty part of the church. She laughed and explained to him that this was the Holy Spirit.

We also use these words metaphorically: "Oh taste and see how gracious the Lord is" (Psalm 34:8). A friend, Dan Hardy, had a powerful spiritual experience when he made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land towards the end of his life. He described it to his daughter, Deborah Ford:

I found our entry into Jerusalem very powerful: the Holy Mount / Temple; the Wailing Wall and, even more so (to me), the entrance to the tunnel under the Western Wall. It's not easy to say quite why, but what struck me as we walked down under the excavations of the old wall was the power of the place: the most ancient stones of the Temple, leading up to much later ones. It's not the physical mass of the place in itself, but that it is alive: radiant with light. There was a Bat Mitzvah taking place down there and a steady stream of people stopping to pray. It gave me the sense of this being the repository of God's light. One could see it phenomenologically, but it's far more than that: it takes eyes to see it, that's all. I just found I was embraced by the light.

It was the sum total of all this that gave me a sense of the huge power of God's light and energy and how the divine is at work.

Daniel W. Hardy with Deborah Hardy Ford, Peter Ochs and David F. Ford, [Wording a Radiance: Parting Conversations on God and the Church](#) (SCM Press, 2010) p.28.

Dan uses the image of light. I am taking a liberty now in using some of Dan's words but transposing them from the key of light to the key of the fragrance of God:

It's an infinitely probing thing: not so much fragrance searching as fragrance penetrating. What is it that attracts someone to something better? The sense I have is that the Goodness simply draws them to something *fuller*. It's an opening and an enabling process: an attraction and recognition of the life and source of life within. It is like a granulation of patterns, words, light, fragrance, senses: things percolating up just like the waters of the Jordan; and a whole range of things coming to the surface, with a new awareness of the simple wonder and beauty of creation and life itself; and with that, the awareness of how little we've 'got it'. So with the fragrance comes sadness and loss but also a yearning to live from this source and to be oriented to it: to the life and health bubbling up deep within. The sense of sorrow is sharing in the grief of God and his longing for the best for his people and the world: longing for us not to be distracted or to waste time. It's about recognising how much more there is than you've ever seen (or sensed, or smelt) before and being attracted by it and lifted up to it. This fragrance is something that's capable of lifting you deeply from within: the word I've used a lot for it is simply "attraction".

(Transposing Daniel W. Hardy's words on pp. 28-29.)

It is about openness to the fact that you cannot contain or hold it or define it.

Children and Animals

Of all our senses, I believe smell is our earliest one to develop meaning for us. Babies recognise their mothers by their smell, and can be disconcerted by a stranger for the same reason. In what may seem quite a strange, but not uncommon, perception, I loved the smell of my babies' early nappies. People sometimes find it easier to say they love the smell of baby oil, for instance, when actually it may be something more primitive than that. We are rather prone to concealing our instinctual humanity, especially where body smells are concerned. I do not think we like to be so unsophisticated.

What is so attractive about distilling a scent from its elements? Six-year-old Tilda was very taken by the row of empty CK1 bottles on my windowsill when she visited us in Dorset. She collected flowers and herbs from the garden, and teas from my kitchen cupboard, and made up three different perfumes to "sell" at the garden gate. After she had gone, I could not bring myself to throw away her creation, so I still have them.

Our earliest memories can be reactivated by smell. Our youngest daughter, Katie, who was born and spent her first nearly five years in Kenya, still has memories triggered by the smell of wood smoke. Most people cooked on wood

fires, so it was very much one of the smells of life and goodness ... and of women, working to feed their families.

Sometimes we pretend. There is a Kikuyu proverb that “the fart of a rich man is odourless” (we pretend not to notice the unsavouriness of someone of whom we feel in awe). In a more creative way, we may pretend not to notice the smell when we visit someone who is elderly or dying. Bad smells nevertheless have a message for us, which we may ignore at our peril. They warn us that something is wrong: an infection which needs treating, food which is going off and might be risky to eat.

In this strange modern world in the West, we often miss out on the basics. One of those is smell. We have the luxury of plenteous, clean, and easily-heated water. We wash our smells away, relentlessly, often several times a day. I wonder what we are afraid of? I am not objecting to cleanliness, but rather pointing out that we are inadvertently missing some of our most fundamental cues. People have deeply personal smells, which form part of who they are. Sexual attraction is stimulated and informed by our sense of smell. Maybe it disconcerts us that smell immediately takes us to bodies. The human condition is to smell, and we are always trying to change the human condition. Trying to pretend to be what we are not. We do not, in our basic humanity, usually smell of roses!

We are more likely to be assaulted by sound than by smell in our everyday life. Our ears are bombarded by music we have not chosen to listen to: the sound of vehicles on the road and of aircraft in the sky. Meanwhile what about our poor noses? We forget them and their miraculous abilities.

Ewes which have lost their own lambs can be persuaded to adopt a motherless lamb by putting the dead lamb's fleece over the live lamb, so that it smells right.

In fact many animals have a far more advanced sense of smell than we do. Dogs can distinguish hundreds of individual dogs in their locality by the smell of their urine. God has given us an insight into his nature through the nature around us – and I bet God has a more complex sense of smell than dogs.

Conclusion

The Jewish commentary *Deuteronomy Rabbah 1.5* reflects on a double effect much like Paul in 2 Corinthians:

As the bee reserves her honey for her owner and her sting for others, so the words of the Torah are an elixir of life for Israel, and a deadly poison to the nations of the world.

In a similar way a drug can be poisonous or healing, the quantity and the context being all important. We may be overwhelmingly grateful when a dose of morphine relieves the pain in the later stages of cancer. In contrast, we may feel quite desperately anxious when we find out that a person we love is trying out a similar drug for rather different reasons.

The key to inoculation, an astonishing life saver, is the active giving of very small doses of something deathly, in order to avoid the deathly effect of exposure to the same element in larger quantity. I am so impressed by the courage of Edward Jenner (and even more by that of his wife) in 1774. He inoculated their children with a cowpox vaccine, leading to them becoming immune to the deadly smallpox.

The French phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty stressed the primacy of embodiment for perception. He claimed that the senses are essential and that the body is the source of our thinking and of our processing. Perception plays a foundational role in understanding the world and in engaging with the world. As we see when we observe babies closely, the body is in a permanent condition of experience, granting us openness to the world through our perceptions. He underlined the fact of the interdependence of consciousness and the body.

Let us rejoice today in our senses, especially smell, in the access they give us to ourselves, to others, to the world, and to God.

[Alison Kings](#)

Alison Kings is a psychoanalytic psychotherapist working in London. She is married to a retired Bishop.