

Journey into Smell

Week 3: 15 March 2009

Theme of the Week

The spiritual understanding of how we connect to others and to God by what we smell.



STARTING OUT

take a deep breath!

Smell is one of the most basic, primitive, and yet incredibly important senses. What we smell can arouse all kinds of emotions in us, fear, pleasure, curiosity, reverence. Smell evokes all kinds of powerful memories, sometimes unexpectedly. There are all kinds of smell related products, scents and perfumes with exotic names and endorsed by celebrities, scented toiletries, scented candles, perfumes for your home and scents to cover or get rid of less pleasant smells that might invade your environment.

There are the 'clean' smells of laundry and polish and the comfortable, welcoming smells of cooking and coffee. Homesick students going away to university are sometimes told to bring something that 'smells like home' which can bring an even more immediate sense of connection than texts and emails.

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

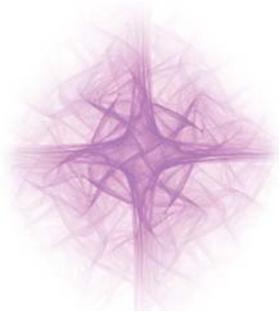
Archbishop Rowan Williams

Most people are well aware of the kind of smells they find appealing and unappealing, but the role of smell in the spiritual journey may be less obvious. Yet people writing in visitors' books in churches do sometimes mention the smell of the place, - whether it smells musty and damp or fresh and well cared for, as part of their experience of the visit. So it makes sense to ask a rather strange question: what does the Christian faith smell like?

In some churches, the use of incense gives the building a characteristic smell that tells visitors that worship has been taking place there. Incense, such as that made by the monks of Prinknash Abbey, are based on frankincense and are blended with natural oils to give a number of distinctive scents. In other churches, the smell a visitor will encounter depends on what is going on, - the smell of fruit and vegetables at a harvest festival, the perfume of flowers at a flower festival, the smell of animals at a pet blessing, the sharp, warm smell of candles, the smell of coffee or food at an after service event. Every place

Poem by kind permission of the Archbishop of Canterbury; © Rowan Williams 2009





of worship has its own smell signature and this can attract or repel people who are seeking to know more about the Christian faith, so it's worth thinking about how we, in the words of St Paul, are 'the aroma of Christ'.

Activity

Some Christian worship has a set pattern of intercession. We pray for the church, for our society, for the world, for the sick and the dying and bereaved, and for ourselves. Do you ever find yourself drifting off and not really listening, not really concentrating on what you should be praying about?

Try this simple set of prayers and see if it makes a difference. You will need to gather up the 'smells' in advance.

Open your prayer book or a hymn book and breathe in until you can smell the pages, then say:

"Lord, we pray for your Church and for Christians everywhere. Help us always to do your will and share your love with others."

Make a cup of tea or coffee or another drink you would share with a friend, breath in the smell of the drink and then say:

"Lord, we pray for our neighbours and friends and all who live in our society. Help us to make it a place of welcome and friendship for all people."

Break open a roll of fresh bread, or other favourite food, or a newspaper, breathe in the smell of the food or the paper and then say:

"Lord, we pray for your world, for all who are poor, hungry, affected by war or violence. Help us never to take peace and comfort for granted."

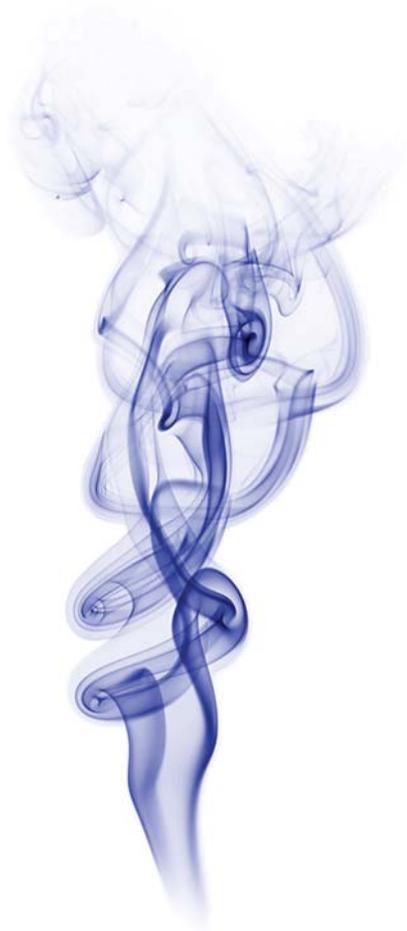
Open a medicated lotion or rub with a characteristic smell. Breathe in the smell of the medication and say:

"Lord, we pray for all who are sick, lonely, or bereaved. May we bring your comfort into the lives of anyone we know who is suffering."

Find your favourite perfume, aftershave or other scented object that you particularly like. Breathe in a little of the scent and say:

"Lord, help me to follow you more faithfully every day."

Next time you use these objects and fragrances, see if they prompt a prayerful response.



GOING DEEPER

The stench of inequality



A story

Maria is a Filipino child who goes to work every day. Every day she goes to the local rubbish dump just outside her village and joins a group of other children who come to see what is on the dump and if there is anything new. As the heat of the day rises the smell of the dump becomes worse and worse, but Maria doesn't really notice, she is used to it. She has lived by and off this dump all her life, as have the rest of her family.

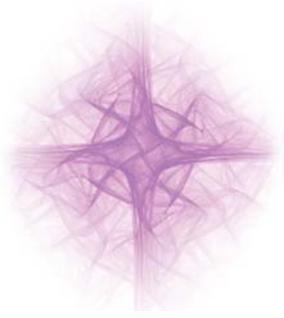
The dump is extremely dangerous and parts of it sometimes catch fire, so Maria is attentive to any smell of burning or smoke. She knows that the dump is poisonous and that she should try not to breathe in too much of the poisonous smells. People get sick that way and none of the people in her desperately poor community can expect to live long.

Maria searches the rubbish for anything that can be re-used in her home, or which her family can sell. She is also looking for food. She is not the only one, animals, insects and birds also scavenge in the rubbish. Much of the food is rotten, but she searches in it anyway looking for things that might be all right to eat.

A question to think about:

What sort of things do you think Maria might be looking for?





Activity

Have a look at your local freecycle group. Then make a list of ten items in your home that you don't really want or don't need. Could they be given to, or used by someone else, before you throw them away?

Have a think about the things you throw away that just rot. Could you compost them and re-use the compost? Find out some more about facilities for using old 'greens' such as plant material, and 'browns' such as leftovers, scraps, newspapers, eggshells and teabags. If you already do this, could you help someone else to get started?

Anosmia

Anosmia is the inability to smell. Relatively speaking, we are all rather bad at smelling, since animals like dogs inhabit a smell world that is richly textured and informative and about which we are entirely unaware. However, we are all conscious that the world is flatter and less interesting when we have a cold and cannot smell and that without the ability to smell, the ability to taste is compromised.

The ability to smell also differs between individuals. When John and Olive Drane visited the House of Bols in Amsterdam, they tried out the Hall of Taste and Smell. A visit there is an amazing experience when it comes to testing your sense of smell. Bols is a Dutch liqueur that comes in many different flavours and which is a basic ingredient of many exotic cocktails. Its history goes back to the days when Dutch adventurers travelled the world and returned home laden with what to them were previously unknown tastes and fragrances.

So a visit to the House of Bols naturally includes a chance to encounter the key flavours that are now included in this special range of drinks. Part of the experience is to guess the identity of as many as you can. John thought it was going to be easy, as virtually all of them are derived from ingredients with which he was already familiar: things like strawberry, mint, coffee, chocolate, kiwi fruit, peaches, and dozens more.

They all look pretty much alike, so the only way to tell them apart is by smell, and rows of bottles with puffers allow you to do that without being sprayed by the liquid. It's the sort of thing that invites competitiveness and he and Olive were soon tracking how long it took to guess what the smells were, and who was better at it. Olive was soon well ahead, and even when she told John what some of them were, it still took a while for him to 'get' them. By the time they got to the end, John had only a handful of correct guesses while Olive got almost all of them right straight away. They soon realised that they actually smell things differently, and that in turn made them more aware of the fact that some people have no sense of smell at all. And they then started to wonder if people are all having the same experience when they talk about smelling fear, or danger, or love.



Activity

Try the experiment for yourself. Find some cotton buds and ten or so different scents. You could use perfumes, scented soap, scented oils, coffee or vanilla essence. Dip a cotton bud into each. Mix the buds up and then try to identify which bud corresponds with which smell. Was this task easy or difficult? What smells give you the most pleasure and why? Try to imagine what it would be like to have no sense of smell, how would your appreciation of the world around you be affected?

MOVING ON

Engaging with scripture differently

This section is based on the Radio 4 programme's main reading for this Sunday.

John 12.1-8

Mary Anoints Jesus

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

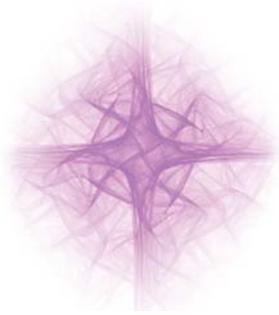
This passage is dominated by smell impressions. We are told about the food which everyone had together and then about the perfume which filled the whole house. We are also poignantly reminded of the presence of Lazarus whom Jesus had raised from the dead and the smell of decay and decomposition. So Jesus reminds us that the gift of fragrance would be part of the embalming ritual at his own death (it is also part of his birth story), so it is a signifier of his whole life as God's son, come to live and to die for us.



Nardostachys grandiflora

Photo: Curtis's botanic magazine
(www.botanicus.org)





Use the Bible to think about Jesus' life as a smell journey. What other stories have significant references to things we can smell? What do we learn about Jesus from those references? Why do you think Judas does not react in the same way to the perfume? What does this tell us about him?

MOVING INTO LENT

The smells of the desert

In his book *Bravo Two Zero*, the former SAS sergeant Andy McNab described the experience of the Middle Eastern desert when he was on active service in Iraq. SAS Patrols are especially trained to use all their senses to assess their environment and to be very highly tuned to what is around them. When you dare not risk being seen, then hearing and smell become especially significant. McNab alerts us in his book to the smell of the cold at night, the smell of dust and rock and the distinctive smell of goats. Alone in the desert, he was also aware of his own smell and of how animals can pick up your scent and the scent of anything human left behind which then attracts people who wonder what the animals have noticed. He was alert to the smell of human activity and the particularly modern smells of war: oil, ammunition discharge, fuels.

Andy McNab was attacked in the desert and had to abandon most of his equipment. Although he was physically extremely fit, he was soon nearly dead of exhaustion, starvation and exposure. The smell of a hot drink, despite the danger of being seen, was like life itself. Later, he was captured, savagely tortured and almost died, during which, blindfolded, his smell experiences were of the worst possible kind, - blood, gangrene, excrement, burning flesh. He identified where he was and which captors were with him by smell: paraffin, cigarettes, particular body odours. He kept his sanity and mental determination by remembering his girlfriend and daughter, memories of family life. He said afterwards that he would forever hate the smell of pork which reminded him of burning bodies.

This story of modern warfare and the appalling evils of torture can help us to see scripture differently. Jesus went out into the desert, but it can be difficult for us to imagine, if we have not experienced it, what it was like to do this and what effect it had on the shape of Jesus' life. Further, Jesus too was readying himself in obedience to go, if necessary (and it was necessary) to humiliation, torture and death. Focusing on the smell picture of the desert and by thinking about the experiences of someone who was trained to pay attention especially to smell, can help us think more deeply about what exactly Jesus was doing and why he was doing it.

Jesus would have been aware of the smell of the desert around him with its dust, dirt and rock, and the smell of the desert dwelling animals. He might have been assailed by the smells of warmth and cooking from various people for whom the desert was home, and who moved about it on their travels. Such smells would have connected him powerfully with God's





Photo: James Emery ©

Bedouin camp near Jericho

creatures and people, and mingled with the smell of his own body as part of that creation. But he must also have been aware of other smells in his imagination which formed part of the temptations as the smells brought back powerful memories of being warm, comfortable and well fed. The devil tempts him to swap the rough rocky smell of a stone for the warm, appetising smell of bread, and surely this must have been in Jesus' mind when he is recorded as saying that no father would give their child a stone when they asked for bread. He might have been assailed by the memory-smell of clothing and fabrics as the temptation to use his power for a life of ease came his way. Yet Jesus puts aside any smell-temptations and fixes his mind and heart on God's purposes.

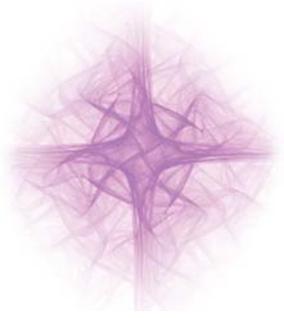
Ironically, when Andy McNab was trying to prove to his captors that he was Christian, not Jewish, he was interrogated about the Christian faith. He was able to answer their questions, but when he was asked when Christians fast, he did not know the answer. He was not aware that some Christians fast in Lent...

Andy McNab DCM, MM, Bravo Two Zero, Bantam Press, 1993

Activity

We too can have smell-temptations, - a food that is not good for us, chocolate, cigarette smoke, the allure of a particular perfume or scent. Make a list of any smell-temptations that might come your way. What would they tempt you to do and why would that be a bad idea?





RESTING ON THE WAY

Prayer and reflection

2 Corinthians 2.15-16

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.

*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*

Where else can this journey take me?

There is more material to explore in Sense Making Faith in the 'Journey into Smell' chapter and you can explore further journeys and ideas in the Explore area of www.spiritualjourneys.org.uk in the section called 'Smell'. One of the popular pages there is the account of a herb garden and the kinds of herbs Christian religious communities often planted.

Patrick Süskind, *Perfume*, Penguin edition 1987

Jim Drobnick (ed), *The Smell Culture Reader*, Berg Publishers 2006

Luca Turin, *The Secret of Scent*, Faber 2007

The Daily Service on Radio 4 from March 16th to 19th offers more readings and reflections for you to listen to about people whose spiritual journeys were changed by particular smell experiences.

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