

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

A Bad Name In The Town

A translator's euphemism. The Greek says *she was a sinner*, and that goes beyond repute, into fact. People *say* a lot of hard things about most of us; much of it unkind, or far from the truth, or not perceptive (the truth about people is always more complex than gossip is willing to allow). Still, when the Gospel says *she was a sinner*, it doesn't leave room for a dissenting verdict; she was.

All Have Sinned

That makes her one of us (if you have read the story of this woman's exotic behaviour with a Pharisaic eye, read it again!) Whatever else, the woman is not far from any of us. This isn't posturing or false modesty; we say at the beginning of every Mass: *I confess that I have sinned*. That makes us all public sinners, and incidentally gets us off being accused of hypocrisy (if we believe what we are saying). No-one can be part of a Catholic congregation without this admission. Let's make it with whole hearts, so that we can be honest before God.

Tears, Hair, Kisses, Expensive Scent

It's a rivetting display: the hair down in public – which had its own significance in the ancient world, being the mark of a loose woman – and the display of emotion, tears and kisses, and above all the sensational outpouring of perfume – *myrrh* – which Luke identifies as *anointing*. I'd like to think about this act. Luke is quite specific with his use of the word *elaion*. But when he lists his complaints to his host, Jesus says: *You gave me no oil to anoint my head; but this woman anointed my feet with myrrh*. His host appears to have neglected a common courtesy; the woman has, instead, done an act of homage for the Messiah: she has recognised *the Anointed of the Lord*.

Myrrh

The appearance of myrrh at this point (I've never seen a translation which identified it as such) surprises us. It's worth knowing that, as a visitor to the parish Biblical group told us last month, perfume was a rare and expensive reality in the ancient world, its use confined to rich and distinguished persons. Yet, at the Easter Vigil, a Catholic Bishop would spend a thousand pounds on scented oil, which would be plastered liberally over the new converts as they emerged from the baptismal font. The bishop would make no distinction between rich and poor; for *all baptised*

in Christ, you are all clothed in Christ, and there is no more Jew or Greek, no freedman or slave, no male or female: you are all one in Christ Jesus. One thing to tell people that in theoretical terms; another thing to unite senators and slaves in a generous, prodigal anointing to make them one with the Messiah himself. Perhaps Jesus' defence of the "wasted" alabaster jar of spikenard was echoed in the local Bishop's defence of his thousand-pound perfume bill at Easter.

The Magi's Gift

Myrrh we know as the third gift of Matthew's magi. In Luke it appears here, in the mysterious moment when a sinner recognises him (*I came to call sinners...*) in the house of a Pharisee who doesn't (...*not the just*). The Pharisee offers no oil; but she offers anointing with myrrh. Here the truth about Jesus can be known only by the *forgiven*. The Magi, who represent the Gentiles at the birth of Jesus, also brought myrrh. They too recognise Jesus as the Messiah, and because they are Gentiles, *falling down they worshipped him* – they come to him in humble recognition, guided by their starry sign from God. They didn't experience the painful transition suffered by the Jews, who had to "come down to earth" in their faith before they could worship a carpenter. So our known weakness and sinfulness must serve to enhance the work of grace, so that we can acknowledge the Messiah with generous love, having been so generously pardoned.
Fr Philip