

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

A Beautiful Scent

Scent is a strange and powerful part of being human. Animals, we're told, are much better at it than we are. I believe that a sagacious dog is guided by scent rather than sight; his world is mapped by perfumes rather than by light falling on objects. When you're driving along, and suddenly in the car before you a nice dog catches sight of you through a rear windscreen, he looks at you with utter indifference. It isn't the sight that turns him on. If you saw the same dog in the open air, he would be sniffing the air to find out what you are.

How Unblessed The Poor In Scent!

I know a poor man who caught a bad cold, and when he came through it he found he'd lost the power to smell anything; and with it went most of his pleasure in tasting as well (which is hugely connected to scent). Sadly he was also a vegetarian, so in one sense it could have been worse. He could no longer smell the rest of us eating roast beef, or bacon. But imagine the poverty of losing the marvellous ways in which scent blesses us: all the more unexpectedly because we easily forget scent, and have little experience of engineering it - beyond personal perfumery and the ghastly smells people put into spray canisters. There is a belated realisation that baking bread or making fresh coffee puts a marvellous smell into a house. But if you compare these things with our massive investment in colour-schemes or sound-systems, we are mere children in the nose department.

A Woman With A Jar Of Scent

This alabaster jar is containing precious liquid. The one Judas regretted so much was worth eighteen months' wages; and it was still spilled forth with prodigal generosity, and the scent filled the whole house. The cost of the ointment is important. This isn't a loathsome stench that has everyone opening the windows and turning a fan on. It's one of those scents which is a work of art, and it deserves its rich packaging. I'm afraid it does something else: and that is to show up a rather frigid style of hospitality in a Pharisee's house. Jesus, I like to think, is not sitting at the table like a Western guest. He is reclining on a couch; and there are many couches, arranged fanwise around a low table. So the guests all have their heads

together, and their bodies radiating away from each other; so the parts furthest away from the business in hand are the feet of the guests. This is where the woman has placed herself. So the head of Jesus is holding a Pharisaic conversation with his host, and his feet are in a much more exotic relationship with a golden-hearted member of the Frail Sisterhood, who is bathing his feet in tears and perfume, and wiping them, God bless us and save us, with her unbound hair. No wonder Simon does not quite know where to put himself!

Jesus Reads The Signs

Simon thinks he has got this woman's number. In fact it is Jesus who has read her heart. He can tell that her apparent shamelessness is not her real self. He can also tell that she has within her huge powers of love and generosity. Jesus has also summed up Simon the Pharisee. Although he is very careful about his religion, he isn't a warm or demonstrative person. He is reserved and frugal with his affections, perhaps afraid of them. I'm quite sure that Jesus knew how easily good people can be reduced to ciphers by their fears, their anxieties, their insecurity. In those ways, the woman with the perfume bottle has nothing left to lose. She feels her low estate very fully; but it has at least opened her life to the truth of generosity and honest affection. She has been so moved by the message of Jesus that she has spent her ill-gotten gains on an expensive scent, which she makes into a sign of her love. Jesus doesn't deprecate her or mock her; he seems to be enjoying the contrast between her and Simon, and he takes on the discomfiture of his host. *You gave me no kiss* (did Jesus really say that to Simon?) *but she has been covering my feet with kisses ever since I came in....* what an extraordinary scene it is! Decorum and religious decency at one end of the couch, and this firework-display of emotion, tears, extravagant waste, and hair at the other! Doesn't it make you think about the kind of man Jesus was, especially in the eyes of the sober Pharisees? The point is that men look at outward appearance, while the Lord looks at the heart. Love isn't tidy, respectable, and well-trained. It demands spontaneity, it turns on the emotions, it makes everything hang

out. Where is our religion, on this spectrum?
Fr Philip