

Spiritual Senses #5: Smell

John 12 v 1-11

Context:

Today we reach the end of our Lent series exploring the spiritual senses, having so far considered sight, taste, touch and hearing. *Smell* is perhaps the most evocative of our *natural* senses and there is much for us to learn spiritually about smell too, as we will discover in today's study. We know that Jesus often enjoyed visiting the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus in the village of Bethany. Bethany was located at the eastern foot of the Mount of Olives and was on the route taken by pilgrims travelling from Galilee in the north to Jerusalem in the south. Jesus often made that journey, travelling down the Jordan valley from his base in Capernaum, then turning right at Jericho and up the Wadi Qelt towards Jerusalem. Bethany was the last village you would pass through before ascending the Mount of Olives on the east side and then descending into the holy city. The home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus became a frequent stopping off point for Jesus where he enjoyed rest and hospitality from his dear friends before continuing his journey into the city. John 11 tells the dramatic true account of the death of Lazarus and Jesus' miraculous sign of raising him back to life after four days in the tomb. This gracious act of Jesus received a mixed response – many put their faith in him (John 11 v 45) but others hardened in their opposition and expedited their plans to kill Jesus (John 11 v 46-53). Unfazed by these threats, Jesus returned to his beloved Bethany and in John 12 we witness a remarkable act of devotion. Let's join the dinner party and see what happened.

Observation:

1. At what time did Jesus' visit to Bethany take place (v 1)?
2. What past incident does John mention in v 1?
3. What special occasion took place while Jesus was there according to v 2 and what roles did Martha and Lazarus take?
4. What did Mary do in v 3 and what was the effect?
5. Who objected to Mary's extravagant act in v 4 and why according to v 5?
6. What comment about this objection does John make in v 6?
7. What was Jesus' reaction in v 7 and what reason does he give in v 8?
8. Who else came to the house and why in v 9?
9. What was the religious leaders' reaction to this in v 10 and why according to v 11?

Meaning:

1. John tells us in v 1 that it was six days before Passover. What would be the *particular* significance of *this* Passover for Jesus and how do you think he might therefore have been feeling as he rested at his friends' home on his way to Jerusalem?
2. John tells us that Martha served at the table (v 2). Can you recall when this had happened before and what do you think this indicates about Martha (see Luke 10 v 38-42)?
3. Lazarus had recently died and been raised by Jesus (see John 11) – so how do you think he would have been feeling as he sat with Jesus at the table (v 2)?

4. What do you think was the motivation for Mary's act in v 3 and how had she previously shown her love for Jesus (see Luke 10 v 38-42)? What do you think the dinner guests would have been thinking as they smelled the strong sweet aroma of the nard (end of v 3)?
5. Jesus often spoke about the imperative of caring for the poor. So do you have any sympathy with Judas Iscariot's words in v 4-5?
6. John tells us that Judas was in fact using religious sentiments as a cover for his own greed. In what ways might this be a warning to us?
7. Jesus' words in v 7 imply that *God moved* Mary to do what she did as a way of anointing Jesus for his burial. We know from the gospel accounts of Jesus' death and burial that there wasn't enough time for the customary pre-burial preparations to be done before Jesus' body was placed in the tomb because it was so late in the day when he died and the Sabbath was about to begin. So, God arranged for Mary to anoint Jesus ahead of time. Do you think Mary realised this is what she was doing? What does this teach us about the attributes of God and the way he works through human beings?
8. This is the second time Jesus came to Mary's defence for her apparent disregard for cultural norms (see Luke 10 v 38-42). What does this tell us about Jesus and how might we be inspired by Mary's attitude and approach?
9. What do you think was the reason for the attitude of the religious leaders in planning to kill Lazarus as well as Jesus (v 10-11) and how might this serve as a warning to us?

Application:

1. Mary demonstrated her love for Jesus in an extravagant way and didn't care what others thought of her. How might we follow her example in our worship and love for Jesus today?
2. Read 2 Corinthians 2 v 14-17 and discuss any parallels between Paul's words and the act of Mary in John 12.
3. How might we spread the fragrance of Jesus today?

Pray:

- Pray that our love for Jesus might be such that we show it in extravagant ways.
- Pray that we might spread the fragrance of Jesus wherever we go this week.