

Sunday, December 11, 2016

The Smells of Christmas

We continue to reflect upon Christmas through God's gifts to us in our senses. Today our focus is on smell and how your sense of smell can cause you to experience both pleasant and offensive smells. Smells which are pleasant like ginger cookies baking in the oven, or not so pleasant when manure is being spread across the fields. Smelling is such a part of who we are that we must remember that perfumes and sweet oils have been used for centuries to cover up and disguise odours which offended.

Some of our celebrations for life's rites of passage including weddings and funerals incorporate the use of odours, smells and especially flowers. They were often used in special celebrations not just for decorative purposes, but to cover up odours which were not pleasing. Why do brides have bouquets? Tradition tells us that brides carried flowers not because they were pretty, but because people did not bathe as frequently as we do now and so flowers were necessary. They might have had a bath in May with weddings being celebrated in June. Flowers were often used in funeral celebrations and would later cover the gravesite of the deceased. The reason for this was because the scent of the flowers covered the odours of the deceased. But what is significant about the sense of smell is that God also is pleased when fragrant aromas are offered to him in prayer and thanksgiving.

Incense is often used in celebrations and has distinct smells and odours. The smoke symbolizes the prayers rising up to God and he receives them. Incense of course was one of the gifts offered to the Christ child by the Wise Men, as it is also strong and used to cover up the smell of the deceased. Smells and fragrances have been offered to God as sacrifices for many years prior to Jesus' birth. This was because it was God who asked people to make sacrifices and when the Lord smelled the aroma from the burnt offering, he was pleased. And people wanted to please God. Because when God was not pleased, he sought to destroy the earth and did so as the story of Noah and the flood tells us.

However, we read in Genesis 8 that after the rains quit, and the ground dried up God called Noah and his family out of the ark. Noah then built an altar to the Lord. He then took some of the clean animals and birds and he sacrificed the burnt offering on it. Then the Lord smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: "Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from children. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done." (Gen 8:20-21).

Making sacrifices upon altars were a part of the Hebrew people's worship experiences to God. We read in the book of Leviticus about the burnt offerings, as well as the other kinds of offerings God sought and received. When all was offered to God and burned on the altar, a pleasing aroma would arise and God would be pleased. For when a sacrifice was offered to God, it was as an atonement for the sins of the one who had sacrificed the animal, bird, or grain. When this offering was made upon the altar, the aroma was pleasing to God and they would be forgiven and reconciled to him.

But because of God's love for us he offered up His Son, Jesus to be the one who would die in our place and as a result of this, we need not make any more offerings upon an altar. Jesus paid the price for

us all through his death. Because he rose to new life we can be assured that God is pleased. All we need to do is believe in Jesus, trust him and live following Christ's way of love.

Yet today we do not need not to make animal sacrifices and because of this there is a sense of what is desired in life, has a pleasant odor. The sweet smell of success may be defined as having a pleasant feeling of being successful. But is this smell of success in line with what can and does bring us joy—the joy but does the success bring joy? True joy which is often shared in the celebrations of Christ's birth or does this pleasant feeling last only a brief time. The joy of knowing Christ is more than something that is pleasing to oneself and short term. Do you know the joy of Christ the infant king who comes at Christmas not just for a pleasant feeling but of real long lasting joy?

In this advent season we look forward to and anticipate celebrating Christmas, when Jesus came to earth as an infant. As we read in Matthew's gospel God put into place the story of Joseph and Mary and the birth of Jesus. Matthew's version does not include the stable and manger but the preparations that Joseph had to go through in his mind about the young woman he was marrying being pregnant by the Spirit. He had to get it through his head that Mary's child was not a child of another man but of God. He had to understand the role he would play in raising this boy as his own and yet really have the Son of God as a kid in his house. But he endured it not alone, but with God's help.

In preparations for Christmas there are many things that people do in order to please others. Baking, cooking, cleaning, decorating the home and the list continues. But how many of these activities please us and others even for a short term? We know that we like to smell certain odours—popcorn popping, spices in cookies, puddings, cakes, turkey slow roasting in an oven but what other kinds of smells do we like? And why do we like them? Is it because they are pleasing us now, or triggering memories of the past. For example, because I grew up where there are plenty of trees, we had a real Christmas tree. I really like the smell of pine or spruce trees and still do, especially after a rain storm. The smell of real Christmas trees may be strong to some, but this holds a special place in memory for me. But what other smells do we remember and do we experience them now or only in our memory? What are the smells of Christmas which hold memories or current activities?

At this time of year we often have the pleasing aroma of spices being baked in various sweets and breads. Spices and perfumes have been used for hundreds of years. It was Mary who took a jar of an expensive perfume and poured it on Jesus' feet. She then wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. One of the disciples, Judas, did not like the fact that Mary's action cost a lot of money. He didn't breathe in the fragrance of the perfume; he only complained of the extravagant use of this burial perfume and did not see it as an act of love.

The smell of various spices when we bake, or the smell of burning scented candles often moves us, to enjoy the moment and relax. There is something about smelling cookies baking that invites us to the moment of sharing love; the kind of love God wants us to share with others. The kind of love, Christ came to teach us about. The kind of love we experience with joy in our hearts and the knowledge of a sweet aroma which fills our memory.

What do we do that enables God to smell a soothing aroma that is pleasing to Him? What are the smells of Christmas which offer God a sacrifice not of a burnt offering, but a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving?

Isn't it wonderful that we need only give thanks to God because he does not seek to receive a pleasant aroma of a burnt offering but merely asks us to believe in the One whom He sent, Jesus, to trust and follow the teachings of his Son Jesus and to live a life of joy. Is this too much to ask? Maybe we need to offer our thanks for the sweet smell of success that God has shown through the gift of Jesus as our Messiah and as our Saviour. But are we really willing to do this? Each time you smell those special fragrances of spices or pine trees, turkey roasting or cookies baking, pause and remember why you are doing these things. It is because God's purpose being fulfilled in the birth of Jesus the one born of Mary, welcomed and raised by Joseph. The one who endured the smells of a stable, the warmth of hay on the manger and the one who loved others to the point of giving of himself through his death on the cross. Open your senses to receive this baby born to be King, yet lived an ordinary life for our sakes. Let us experience with the gifts God has given to us through our senses the full message of Christ's birth- and let us rejoice that we need only to trust and love and follow the Christ of Christmas, the baby who came to save the world in love and through love. Thanks be to God

Let us pray

Holy God we praise and thank you for your gift to us in Jesus. Help us to awaken our senses as we seek pleasant aromas which remind us of Christ's birth, and the joy and wonder we may receive through this. Hear us o God we pray. Amen.