

Fifth Sunday of Lent, 7th April 2019. Canongate Kirk.

St John 12:3 *The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.*

Yesterday we had the only church wedding scheduled for this month and once again it was too early for the annual blaze of colour that the cherry trees at the front gates always bring to the Kirkyard but just very occasionally and entirely unpredictably to the wedding photographs of a fortunate bride and groom. But if yesterday's happy couple had taken a wander to the lower part of the Kirkyard at the opposite end to the front gates, down towards Calton Road, they would have found the most magnificent white cherry blossom already in full bloom and lighting up quite literally what is usually one of the duller corners of the Kirkyard especially on an overcast day. Go and have a look at it after the service, the path is a bit uneven so take care, but it's well worth a look while it lasts, which won't be long.

The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. The white blossom may not have worked as a backdrop to yesterday's wedding but it rather wonderfully illustrates today's Gospel reading, the account of the anointing at Bethany where Mary takes a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anoints Jesus' feet and wipes them with her hair. It's a striking and entirely unpredictable moment of extravagance that lights up the moment like our tree laden with white blossom on a grey day. And this was otherwise something of a grey day for Jesus, six days before the Passover which would mark the start of his betrayal and his arrest and ultimately his trial and his crucifixion. The storm clouds are already gathering, the outlook is bleak and the generous, thoughtful, extravagant and unexpected gesture of Mary offers a rare moment of relief, a lightening and brightening of the scene. Like the blossom itself, it doesn't last long, Judas quickly interrupts with his dubious complaint that the perfume should have been sold and the money given to the poor rather than recklessly wasted in Mary's unnecessary behaviour. Jesus dismisses his intervention but the storm clouds quickly roll in again, the moment has passed and the scene is set for his fateful if triumphal entry into Jerusalem. But more of that next week, on Palm Sunday. For the moment let's stay with the blossom, with the perfume, with the contrast to what is all around. *The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.* It may not have lasted for long but for the moment *The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.*

This Fifth Sunday in Lent, just ahead of Palm Sunday, used to be known as Passion Sunday, passion in the old-fashioned sense of suffering referring to what lay ahead for Jesus beyond his triumphal entry into Jerusalem just a couple of miles west from Bethany where for the moment he finds refuge at the home of Martha and Mary and Lazarus. Theirs is the house that was filled with the fragrance of the perfume, theirs is the house where Jesus felt most at home whatever else was going on around him. And yet even here he cannot avoid the harsh reality of what awaits him. "Leave her alone," he says of Mary and of her costly perfume, "she bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial." And perhaps in the pouring out of the precious ointment he anticipates not only the anointing of his body for burial but the pouring out of his own life-blood on the cross waiting on a green hill not so very far away at all.

*He died that we might be forgiven,
He died to make us good,
That we might go at last to heaven.
Saved by his precious blood.*

“Let’s do something beautiful for God” is what Mother Teresa is reputed to have told Malcolm Muggeridge when he first approached her almost exactly fifty years ago about the possibility of making a documentary about her and her work with the Sisters of Charity in their so-called House of the Dying in Calcutta, a hospice where the sisters cared for those who were both destitute and dying. Let’s do something beautiful for God. In a sense that sums up what Mary does for Jesus when she pours out her perfume and wipes his feet with her hair. Something beautiful in the midst of harsh reality, something life-affirming in the face of death. Theirs was not strictly speaking a house of the dying, though Lazarus of course had died and been raised from the dead. But Jesus did not now have long to live, and *The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume*. Let’s do something beautiful for God.

I am about to do a new thing, writes the prophet Isaiah channelling the word of God. I am about to do a new thing...I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. A new thing, a beautiful thing, an unexpected thing; a way in the wilderness, a river in the desert, a tree full of white blossom in a dark corner of the Kirkyard. In the coming days Jesus would fulfil many of Isaiah’s prophecies, not least that promise to do a new thing. For that was what his death on the cross would be, dying to make us good, and rising again to bring new life and light to a dark world. A new thing, a beautiful thing, an unexpected thing. His love would be the most extravagant of all, his outpouring of himself the most reckless abandonment to God’s grace and glory which anyone would ever see, and which to this day inspires those who follow him to wonder and to worship, to offer ourselves however inadequately in his service, and to press on, as St Paul puts it, to press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

*Take my love – my Lord, I pour
At your feet its treasure-store;
Take myself, and I will be
all for you eternally.*

And when we pour our love at his feet, will the house not be filled with the fragrance of the perfume? And now may God bless to us this preaching of his most holy word, and to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be all praise and glory now and forever. Amen.