

Revelation 8:1-4 Sermon on Smell

We're continuing our series on using our senses in worship and today's reading is about a lot of things, but one of them is smell. We've looked at our hearing, sight, touch and taste and so this is the last in the series. You might think that our sense of smell doesn't really correspond to how we think of worship, but as I've said before, we are all embodied creatures and so smell is an important part of who we are, and also smell appears more often in the Bible than you might think. Sometimes there's a stench which rises up to God – a stench of his people committing terrible acts and worshipping other gods, sometimes there's the literal stench of decay like Lazarus before Jesus raised him from the dead or the lack of an expected smoky smell from the three friends who were thrown into the fiery furnace in Daniel, and sometimes there's the sweet aroma of offerings to God.

If you wander into many grand churches or cathedrals, particularly on religious festivals, you may well use your sense of smell as you enter the building as you take in the waft of incense, burned during services. This practice dates back to Jewish times in temple worship. So smell, is something we can't dismiss in thinking about our senses.

Today's reading is from Revelation. It's not an easy-to-understand reading, as very little of Revelation is. When we planned this sermon series, I was going to burn some incense in the church as an illustration, but being in the midst of the Covid-19 crisis actually gives this reading a context in a way I couldn't have imagined, but we'll have to do some background first. Please stick with it.

The book of Revelation is apocalyptic literature, which is an ancient genre we're not used to dealing with nowadays. It's full of symbol and image and so it is really difficult to understand. It is a kind of literature which is used to reveal reality, generally to an oppressed or suffering people. Revelation was written at a time of great persecution of Christians and its intention is to give the faithful followers of Jesus insight into heavenly reality and the Christian's place in the history of the world, and the place of God's justice in it.

We're jumping in mid-way through the story, and since I haven't got a lecture series, you'll have to just accept that I can't give you a huge amount of context. Up to this point there have been six 'seals' opened on a book, each bringing with it some catastrophe, and then this is the seventh one, which itself marks the beginning of a set of seven trumpets, which will bring more disasters until finally there is a point in which enough is enough and a final judgement is proclaimed and a new world is formed where God lives with his people. All very apocalyptic indeed.

So the seventh seal has been opened and then, quite unexpectedly, being as we're expecting more doom and mayhem, heaven descends into silence. There are loads of possible reasons for this discussed in the literature, but the main ones are that this could be some sort of silence like that before creation in anticipation of a new world order about to arise, or it could be the silence which precedes judgment in some Jewish scripture, or it could be a silence in heaven so that angels are hushed so the prayers of the suffering saints can be heard. Connected to this latest option is my preferred one which I'll explain...

Much of the apocalyptic writing in Revelation follows the pattern of the daily sacrifice service in the temple in Jerusalem as it would have been in Jesus' day. The service begins with the trimming of the 7 lamps (see Rev 1-3), then the slaughter of a lamb (see Rev 5), the blood offering (Rev 6) and then an incense offering during which there would be a time of prayer and silence. This is where we are up to now. Afterwards there are other offerings (Rev 16), trumpet blasts (Rev 8), and Psalm singing

(Rev 19). So it may well be that this half hour of silence reflects the time of prayer in the daily service, and that even heaven is hushed to receive it.

After, or during, the silence, the trumpets are handed out to seven angels, who, again according to Jewish tradition, presented the prayers of the saints to God. And then an angel with a censer offers incense with the prayers of the saints and the smoke rises before God.

We've talked a bit about smell, and here we have incense being burned with the prayers of the saints. The picture is of the prayers of the suffering Christians rising to God as a pleasing aroma. It's an amazing thought. The point of apocalyptic writing is to reveal the goings on in heaven, and we learn that God, not only listens to the prayers of his people, but that they are a sweet aroma to him. If you read on, not only are the prayers received, 'sniffed' and enjoyed, but they are acted upon also, dramatically and purposefully. But that is getting beyond our passage.

What I want us to focus on today is that this sequence reveals, to those it was written for, the heavenly context of the whole of the disasters they were facing. At times of suffering and hardship, we have the privilege of knowing that heaven is watching, and what happens here affects what is going on there and vice versa. So as we face Covid-19 and all the uncertainties of coming out of lockdown, the mourning, the ongoing societal changes, the economic and financial implications and the health issues that follow on, perhaps we too need to see again how heaven is affected by earth. And most importantly, what happens to our prayers.

It can be hard to pray, especially when we are feeling down. We've all had times when we've stopped praying or when we've had to force ourselves to pray, perhaps just out of routine, and feel like we are shouting into the void, or our prayers are bouncing off the ceiling. With the church being shut, some of us have had to learn again to pray at home and that probably felt different. In our reading, we see today what happens to our prayers when they are seen from heaven's side.

Put simply, in our reading, we can see that the earthly church is enabled, in their prayers, to participate in the worship that is going on in heaven. The incense burning and the silence, following the pattern of daily worship in the temple is no accident. A great liturgy is playing out in heaven, and amazingly, we, as Jesus' followers on earth, get to be part of that amazing heavenly service. We may feel like our prayers haven't been heard or that they hit the ceiling and bounce off, but in fact they become part of the great worship liturgy in the heavenly throne room! The earthly church, scattered, isolated and quarantined even, participates in heaven's worship.

The flip-side to this is that heaven embraces the struggles of the earthly community. In adding incense the angels are joining in, not editing, but adding richness and beauty to our earthly offering of prayer.

The prayers not only join in the service in heaven but rise to God himself and there they take effect. The effect, for those who were the first readers of this apocalypse was not, however, to take them completely out of their troubles. It didn't save them from oppression. There was much trouble to come, as the rest of Revelation testifies. However, in the next verse after our reading, the coals from the incense alter that had burned with the prayers were hurled down back upon the earth in wrath and judgement, and the rest of the liturgy plays out which ends with God's kingdom coming.

For the saints on the earth, their prayers did not guarantee them a way around the woes and disasters they faced, but instead they were led through these disasters with the vision of the heavenly reality that their prayers were heard, that they were indeed participating in heaven, and that God would mightily act to bring in his kingdom.

When we pray 'Thy Kingdom Come' we are praying that more and more God's Kingdom would be here on earth. The narrative of Revelation generally assures us that this is happening, and that history is moving towards that day. But specifically here, when we pray, in whatever we face, we are assured of a great and mighty hearing from God, but also of heaven's full participation even in the meagre prayer that we whisper and then doubt that anyone hears. We can be certain that the lonely silent panicked plea is not only heard, but is a pleasing aroma to God. We can be sure that even if we haven't prayed in a while, when we do, we worship God with the rest of heaven itself.

So when you next pray, imagine the aroma rising to God. Maybe even light a scented candle to remind you if you're struggling to believe. And when you next enter a church which smells of incense, remember you are entering God's house, an echo of the heavenly throne room, where God receives all the prayers of his saints with joy, and acts on them with power. What a privilege to be a part of such an infinite liturgy. Amen.