

SIBYLS SERVICE – 25 September 2026

Welcome and Introduction

Good evening everyone and welcome to this time of worship together. Tonight we are going to be thinking about the Fragrance of Friendship.

When I was asked to do a service, I told Pauline that I felt inadequate to do so, because, as a friend of you all, I do not necessarily understand or appreciate all you go through or what your needs might be. Pauline just said 'We need all the friends we can get right now' – which inspired me to think about friendship tonight.

The fragrance of Friendship

So, as we start our time together may we be inspired by a verse from the Psalms to praise God.

Psalms 141:2 says

²Let my prayer be counted as fragrant incense before you
and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice.

We gather as friends, and with our friend Jesus and so we let the fragrance of Jesus fill the places of our homes and hearts, the church we are a part of, and our lives as we sing.

Song May the fragrance of Jesus fill this place.

<https://youtu.be/sfokEYCn-3o?si=eQ-8Qw-GzV8k77LG>

Highfield Community Baptist Church

We continue to seek the fragrance of God as we pray our thanks and confession.

Prayer

From the corners of our world
From the loneliness of our hearts
From the confusion of life
Gather us O God

To feed our minds
To fire our imagination
To renew our friendship with you and each other
Gather us O God

Jesus you were a friend of the disciples
You taught them, you guided them, you loved them
As we meet in worship
Teach us, guide us, love us

Jesus you were a friend to the outcast and sinner
You called them, challenged them, you forgave them
As we pray to you
Call us, challenge us, forgive us
We spend a moment letting our friend Jesus
Search the corners of our minds, the depths of our hearts
And reveal what is not of God
Where love has been abusive, where friendship has failed
Where justice has not prevailed
And give it to our friend who loves us and challenges us to change
(time to reflect)
Our friend forgives us fully and freely
Thanks be to God

Jesus you were a friend of the sick
You touched them, healed them and restored them
As we seek you today
Touch us in our need, heal what needs wholeness, restore us to who we truly
are in you.

Jesus you are our friend
Bind us to each other and to you
So that your love for us
May be reflected in our love for all
May the fragrance of Jesus fill this place, our lives, your world
Amen

Our reading tonight is about how a women showed not only friendship but
love to Jesus, and how Jesus used that to show love to others, challenge

insincerity and give his life for the world. And what she did is still being talked about today.....

We are using the version from Mark's gospel

Reading Mark 14:3 -9 The Message

³⁻⁵ Jesus was at Bethany, a guest of Simon the Leper. While he was eating dinner, a woman came up carrying a bottle of very expensive perfume. Opening the bottle, she poured it on his head. Some of the guests became furious among themselves. "That's criminal! A sheer waste! This perfume could have been sold for well over a year's wages and handed out to the poor." They swelled up in anger, nearly bursting with indignation over her.

⁶⁻⁹ But Jesus said, "Let her alone. Why are you giving her a hard time? She has just done something wonderfully significant for me. You will have the poor

with you every day for the rest of your lives. Whenever you feel like it, you can do something for them. Not so with me. She did what she could when she could—she pre-anointed my body for burial. And you can be sure that wherever in the whole world the Message is preached, what she just did is going to be talked about admiringly.”

Thoughts

A noticeably high-class woman sat next to an ordinary woman on the train. As an overindulgence of perfume wafted in the air the ordinary woman said ‘What’s that smell?’ The high-class woman looked down her nose and said ‘Chanel - £300 pounds a bottle’ and turns away
Ten minutes later the ordinary woman lets out a silent fart. ‘What’s that smell?’ said the high-class woman. To which the ordinary woman says ‘Aldi sprouts, 49p a bag.

That's not just a funny joke but also, I think depicts what is happening in the bible reading we had today – the woman there had a sweet-smelling expensive perfume, but it created a bad smelling reaction from some.

This story, in Mark's gospel, is set in Bethany. The place where Jesus had friends – particularly Mary, Martha and Lazarus. The fragrance of friendship was good there. He visited them, ate with them, shared their joys and sorrows. They loved Jesus and listened to him and sought to serve him. In John's gospel this story of the anointing is put shortly after Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. After Jesus had changed the stench of a four-day dead body into the sweet perfume of resurrection and life.

Interestingly, it is as if this woman, in a sense, does the opposite. Changing the sweet perfume of nard into a sign and smell, that Jesus was going to die. The smell of embalming.

What a wonderful ministry of friendship both these examples show. To be with people in their need, when facing problems and danger, when suffering and grieving. The fragrance of friendship can smell like a soothing hope, the touch of love, a presence of peace.

This woman is not named in Mark's gospel – others name her as Mary, possibly Mary Magdalene or Mary, Lazarus' sister, but unnamed here. I chose this version deliberately, as we discover that someone who was unknown and unnamed, is in fact, a true friend of Jesus and becomes a renowned disciple – remembered forever.

A transgender reading of this encourages us to know that when we might feel unknown or unrecognised, unaccepted, - Jesus sees and values us and encourages us to be who we are, despite any criticisms. To serve him in the wonderful womanly ways we can. And I do not exclude men in that as all of us have womanly aspects in our being.

And this passage is about a subversive act that does challenge patriarchal ways, that shows us a model for non-gender conformity. Only prophets and kings, exclusively men, were allowed to anoint in public. But this woman breaks the social decorum. Firstly, she enters a room of reclining men and secondly, she anoints and touches Jesus intimately. She rejects her assigned roles of gender in her society. What a courageous woman.

And it does take bravery, or foolishness, to do it.

And the same applies still today, but do it we must – keep breaking the restricting gender roles in our society. Yes, we have come a long way, but not far enough. We still need woman and men like this woman, to challenge the accepted and sometimes abusive norms.

Of course, like in this reading, it will result in criticism. In our reading there were murmurings amongst the men, it is even suggested, from some of the disciples. Some gospels name Judas particularly, but maybe they have their own hidden agenda for doing that. But I like that in Mark, like the woman is unnamed, so the critics are. It could be anyone, even us. And in Mark it is not about Judas, a man, a betrayer, but about a woman and the wonderful significant thing she did.

When we do good and noble things we may be criticised or scolded. We should maybe almost expect it. I suppose for a group of people here, my friends, that may almost sound insulting. How do I know or appreciate the rejection, abuse and condemnation some of you may have had to face. Why should you have to face it? Is it God's will that you face it?

Of course not and you shouldn't have to, but those who do things that challenge the accepted norm, like this woman in our reading, like Jesus in his

life, will face carrying their cross of suffering, but also hopefully leading to resurrection. And those of us who seek to be a friend, want to help carry it too.

It is interesting that the critics in this reading use economics and feasible arguments to put this woman down., namely the care of the poor. As if she didn't or Jesus didn't care about them. And economic and institutional respectability can be used as a weapon on those who break norms. Made up and reasonable sounding arguments that try to win public approval. I suppose like those who try to suggest transgender issues are predominantly about which toilet to use.

But Jesus steps in saying, not that the poor aren't important, but that what this woman did was far better and the right thing in that moment, at that time. That is the thing about Christian ethics, it is not as simple as what is right or wrong, but what is good or best in each given situation and time. And in this

moment her use of her expensive perfume and touch of Jesus body was the right thing.

And this reading does also highlight and elevate bodies – the human form and bodily presence. In a time when Christian views can often try to diminish bodies and their importance and value – what they look like and what we do with them. Where some do still separate the body from the spirit. But here we see how your body, my body, is who we are and can be used to minister to Jesus and others.

I wonder what your favourite perfume is?

Mind is Paris by Yves Saint Lauren. My husband who died first bought it for me and so it has special meaning to me and is now worn in memory of him. But also, my children grew up knowing that was the smell of their mum and they

could recognise it anywhere. They still do. Our fragrance, the one Jesus gave us needs to be worn in memory of him so others recognise Christ in our bodies. My children also seem to know the smell of my farts too.

So whatever fragrance we create in the coming month, be it beautiful and nice, worshipping God and caring for others, or putrid, calling out injustice – may we continue to appreciate the fragrance of friendship, with Jesus and each other. Amen

We continue to reflect on those thoughts and seek to respond as we sing of the friend we have in Jesus. And we do so with a version that shows the joy of friendship, singing together, and reflects aspects of our story, as what at one time would be seen as a questionable woman, being black, bringing the light and love of Christ to others. Enjoy and join in as you can.

Song What a friend we have in Jesus

https://youtu.be/AubmN7UYIRQ?si=kD_Kn5GPHbw32e2K

Response/Prayers

We respond now in prayer.

In the bible prayer is depicted as incense rising up to God.

So, I will light an incense stick as a visual aid.

But we have also thought about touch today and so our prayers are based on the kind of people Jesus touched in various ways, and how we might continue that touch today.

The response will be, when I say May the fragrance and touch of Jesus,
We all respond – fill these prayers.

May the fragrance and touch of Jesus – **fill these prayers**

We pray.....

Jesus – you touched the lives of so many people and places in your journeys on earth, we bring before you the many who long for love, justice, peace, hope and joy today.

You lovingly used nature to explain God's kingdom and we pray for environmental issues and care of the earth. The need for a gently touch as we live in this world. The need for a fierce cry for change as we destroy the earth. The sweet smell of nature and the stench of pollution.
May the fragrance and touch of Jesus – **fill these prayers**

You lovingly taught what real power was, turning truths and expectations upside down. Honouring the lowly, the peacemakers, those treated unjustly. We pray for those touched by injustice and war. Whose lives are torn and

broken and think especially of Gaza and Ukraine, but many other places caught up in conflict. We pray for all those who have the power to change things, not just world rulers, but even ourselves.

May the fragrance and touch of Jesus – **fill these prayers**

Lovingly you prepared a meal for your friends, feeding them practically and spiritually. We pray for all in poverty and need. For the many in our world who face death daily, who lack basic needs. Jesus indicated we would always have them to help, but how often we forget to. We pray for agencies and charities working hard to touch their lives. We also think of how a lack of the spiritual food of love leads to such injustices and need, and pray for a retouching of our world with a love that is seen in action

May the fragrance and touch of Jesus – **fill these prayers**

You lovingly embraced the untouchable outcasts in society, giving them value and honour, welcoming all in love. We pray for all who feel forgotten, abused, scared, misunderstood. But especially those who are affected due to transgender. Give courage and comfort in the various situations faced. May the fragrance and touch of Jesus – **fill these prayers**

Lovingly you healed the sick and we lift to you now any we know in need of your touch tonight. People in our hearts and on our minds, who are our friends that need your fragrance and love in their lives.

(Time to remember others we know)

Bring to each what is needed.

And we lift ourselves to you, opening our hearts and minds, our hands and lives to your touch. You know our need and will meet it as we carry all to you in prayer.

May the fragrance and touch of Jesus – **fill these prayers**

We bring all our prayers together as we join in the prayer Jesus gave his friends to pray saying

Lord's Prayer

We close our time of worship as we sing of letting love be real. If you do not know the words you will recognise the tune.

Song Let love be real

https://youtu.be/tZUo4gGaq2c?si=1f3ycOMGJPz_L7Zj

Blessing

We open our hands in friendship and love,
to God and each other now
as we bless each other in the words of the slightly adapted grace

**May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God
and the friendship of the Holy Spirit be with us now
and evermore
Amen**