

At a time when we are aware that so many are grieving, anxious, fearful, uncertain we ask God to hear our prayer. Maybe you would consider saying the Lord's prayer out loud at the end knowing that our '*prayers be set before you like incense*' Psalm 141:2

Father forgive us that we have allowed fear to take root in our hearts rather than trust the assurance you have given us that all of creation came from your hands and remains in your hands.

Father forgive us for stocking our cupboards with much more than we really need, forgetting that our riches are stored in heaven.

Father forgive us for acting out of a place of scarcity and have forgotten the abundant loving kindness and grace and mercy you shower upon us every day.

Father forgive us when we have seen our neighbour as a threat and a competition and an inconvenience rather than a loved and valued created human being made in your very own image.

Father forgive us for seeking assurance in words of newspapers and social media and news bulletins and not turning to your words of eternal life which speak into every human situation and offer comfort and wisdom and solace.

Father we have locked ourselves into our homes by our attitudes, our behaviour, our selfish needs and think the locked door will give us security and contentment. Thank you that no lock can ever keep you out and at this time possibly more than ever before in our human history we need you, we beg you, we ask you to come amongst us and speak to us as you did to those first frightened followers in an upstairs room. They were scared and we are scared and yet your words resound loud and clear and true – do not be afraid, do not be afraid, do not be afraid for I am with you and I give you my peace.

We claim your peace completely – may it melt into our hearts, into our lives, into our relationships, into our very being and may there be no room for fear as we pray to you our Father God who even now grieving with his children is picking us up and carrying us onwards. Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us

from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory. Forever and ever
AMEN

Spreading the Fragrance

2 Corinthians 2: 14-16a NIV

¹⁴ But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere. ¹⁵ For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. ¹⁶ To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life. And who is equal to such a task?

When I read this passage – I wanted to answer the question 'And who is equal to such a task?' with the words - We are, You are.

In a time when we are being told to limit social contact and be extra careful in our day to day activities, we think now about the sense of smell. And as Easter is fast approaching we think of the events that led to the cross.

One of the most beautiful stories is Mary anointing Jesus feet with the wonderfully expensive and sweet smelling perfume

John 12: 13 "Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume"

That is the thing about smell – it permeates the whole area and cannot be contained. We know this with really pleasant smells and we certainly have come across the same experience with the not so pleasant ones!

Mary's actions were celebrated by Jesus but also met with resistance and criticism by the disciples and for many smell can also be comforting or offensive. Some people love the smell of newly mown grass while others dislike it intently. The smell of freshly baked bread can be a comfort to some while for others it reminds them of bittersweet times when a loved relation, no longer with them, baked daily and so the smell is tinged with poignancy.

Yet what Mary did for Jesus alone affected the entire house and was experienced by all those present – her act of kindness and devotion and love spread beyond the recipient – all received her gift.

The same is exactly true today. The abundant acts of kindness and concern that have spontaneously broken out in our community are affecting young and old alike. The elderly feel remembered, supported, valued. The young feel useful, privileged to help and eager to make a difference. We no longer feel alone. The fragrance is spreading.

And what of that ‘triumphal procession’? Well in Roman times this would have been a very well known phenomenon. They would have had victory marches to display the might and power of the Roman Empire. Part of this propaganda parade would have been to have priests marching along with incense burners swinging back and forth so the smell would reach people long before they saw the procession.

The fragrance of the incense heralded the arrival of the victory parade. So when Paul speaks of triumphal processions with pleasing aromas – his listeners would immediately have had experience of this and could understand the comparison being made.

No need for incense burners – we are to spread the pleasing aroma of Christ Jesus. It cannot be contained and it will affect all.

Our landscape has greatly changed in such a short space of time and while our hearts are saddened by the knowledge that some have died, some are seriously ill at home or are now unemployed we are also witnessing the amazing epidemic of kindness and genuine concern. It seems the wider world has finally caught on to something we as Christians have always known – Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength and **love your neighbour as yourself.**

We are all part of this triumphal procession; we are the privileged people who have always known this truth and can lead the way for a world that, for a while, seemed to have forgotten all are made in the image of God. Fragrance cannot be contained or controlled but will infect all it touches and that is one infection I am more than happy to catch.

Prayer from Church of Scotland

Living God,

In our hour of need we turn again to you, for we have nowhere else to turn.

We put our faith in you, because you have proved your faithfulness time and again.

We reaffirm our love for you because you have never let us go.

We thank you that you are not distant from us.

but have drawn near, in your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

He has shared our life, tasted our death and defeated it;

He understands our worries and our fears.

Help us to respond as your children now.

We pray for this pandemic spreading across our world,

remembering all who have lost loved ones.

and praying for those seriously ill at this time.

We uphold the National Health Service.

as it responds to this added pressure on its already overstretched services.

We pray for doctors and nurses and all in the caring professions,

who work to help and support people as best they can.

We remember those working behind the scenes.

testing samples, confirming results, giving information to patients.

We uphold others trying to understand this virus better.

working to create an effective remedy.

We pray for our Governments in Westminster and Stormont,

as they work with the best medical advice.

to guide us on how we should respond.

and what action we should take.

We pray that these guidelines might be taken seriously.

and that all would put them into action.

May this crisis bring out the best in us, not the worst.

Help us to live by faith and not by fear;
to build bridges not barriers,
and to resist all who would speak ill of any other group.
May we not forget our responsibility to one another,
not least to the vulnerable and voiceless in our communities.
Help us to find ways of keeping in touch and offering reassurance.
to those with underlying health issues;
for any who feel particularly vulnerable. or in danger at present.
As the virus spreads. we pray for the disruption it causes to normal life,
bringing new fears and anxieties:
We pray for those who have been laid off as their work disappears;
for financial hardship for individuals and businesses;
for the impact on the economy and pensions, when austerity has already left its
mark.
We pray for those whose trips, both for business and pleasure, have been cancelled;
and others where events, long anticipated and planned for, have been postponed;
for those making contingency planning for home based work or child care or exams.
May our inconvenience not blind us to others' loss.
We remember those. who cannot visit loved ones in locked-down care homes;
for the elderly whose social contacts have been severely curtailed;
help us to find creative ways of keeping in touch,
of assuring them they are not forgotten or ignored.
May congregations find new ways of living though this time.
May we not forget our faith, but draw strength from it.
So may our worship be heartfelt, our fellowship deepen. and our service increase.
God of grace and God of mercy hear our prayers at this time.

Strengthen us, by your Spirit, so that:

we may carry on our lives as best as we are able, looking out for others,
showing love in action, being faithful in prayer, and bringing encouragement, hope
and peace; always trusting in you. our Rock and our Redeemer.

These prayers we bring to you. in Jesus' name.