

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, July 23, 1995, by the Rev. Dr. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

PSALM 45:8

“All your robes are fragrant with Myrrh
and aloes and cassia, out of the ivory palaces.”

THE REGAL ROBES OF CHRIST

If you visit the Cathedral Church of Notre Dame in Paris, be sure to ask the guide to let you see the sacristy. In that room are great oaken wardrobes in which are preserved priceless vestments, many of them made of pure cloth of gold, hung with glittering jewels, which once were worn by popes and cardinals and archbishops. As the custodian opens these wardrobes and lifts up the robes before the ravished eyes of the tourists, the fragrance of the aromatic spices in which they have been preserved fills the whole room with a fragrance which is almost oppressive.

This Palm Sunday morning, as we open the drawer of our text, we look upon the regal robes of Christ; and as we lift them up, flashing with eternal jewels, the sanctuary is filled with the aroma of these garments which “are fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia, out of the ivory palaces.”

Psalm 45 is one of the eighteen Messianic psalms; that is to say, the Church has always regarded eighteen of the psalms as being prophetic in the sense that they foretell the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ as the promised Messiah and Savior of His people. Let me give you but one example of this. Listen to what the author of the 22nd Psalm, writing centuries before Christ came into the world, has to say about the Savior suffering upon His Cross: “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? . . . All who see Me mock Me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads and saying: He trusts in the Lord; let the Lord rescue Him. Let Him deliver Him, since He delights in Him they divide My garments among them and cast lots for My clothing.” (Psalm 22:1, 7, 8, 18).

In Psalm 45 the King prepares Himself to meet his bride; and the Christian Church has always seen in this the picture of Christ, the eternal Bridegroom, being wedded to His Bride, the Church, which He has purchased with His own blood. As Christ steps forth, His robes rustle and flash in their celestial beauty. His majesty and splendor overmaster us. These garments are not soiled and travel—worn like those which He wore when treading the dusty roads of Palestine. They are spotlessly radiant and bear the very fragrance of heaven. They “are fragrant with myrrh, and aloes, and cassia, out of the ivory palaces.”

Let us ask of our text three questions:

1. Why are the robes of Christ fragrant with myrrh?

Myrrh is the dried gum obtained from a species of balsam shrub grown in Arabia and

India. In ancient times it was bought and sold at a high price. The first present ever given to the infant Jesus was a pot of myrrh laid at His feet by one of the worshipping Kings of the Orient. And the last gift that was ever offered to Him, as He hung upon the cross, was “wine mixed with myrrh.” It was used in trade; it has a sweet and fragrant perfume, and one piece of it no larger than a chestnut will perfume a whole room.

So, when we read that Christ’s garments are fragrant with myrrh, we are reminded of the fragrant beauty of our Lord’s character. I know that to many He is no more than a great historical figure, one of the moral trailblazers of humanity, a heroic theme for a poem, a beautiful subject for a painting. But to those of us who have heard His voice and experienced His pardoning grace, He is music and light and eternal fragrance.

His was the one perfect life ever lived upon this earth. In Him we see exemplified the life God meant every human being to live. When He arrived on this little planet, laying aside, for a brief thirty-three years, the glory which He had enjoyed from all eternity, He brought with Him the beauty and the fragrance of that brighter and better world.

See the perfect poise with which He met every situation. See His hands laid in blessing upon the little children, and in healing upon the leper and the blind man. See Him praying at dawn upon the mountain side and speaking words of forgiveness from the cross to His murderers. As we read the Gospel narratives, and hold fellowship with our Lord, do we not exclaim — “Oh, if only I could live like that! — no outbursts of temper, no paralyzing anxieties, no crippling jealousies, no cherished impurities, no wasted hours, no bitter regrets!”

But the glory of the Gospel is that Christ offers to make us like Himself! Christianity does not mean doing the best you can to slavishly obey a set of moral regulations. It means opening the door of your life, giving Christ the keys, and then allowing Him to take complete control, so that He can live out His triumphant resurrection life through you! This is the only way to know victory and fulfillment in your life — “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27).

You remember how, one week before His crucifixion, our Lord came to that friendly home at Bethany where lived Martha and Mary and Lazarus, their brother. And when supper was finished, Mary did a lovely thing. She took some expensive perfume, and she poured it on Jesus’ feet, and then wiped his feet with her hair. Commentators tell us that the amount of perfume she used would have cost the equivalent of a working man’s wages for a whole year! But St. John adds this significant remark — “And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume” (John 12:3). What happened was this: When Mary had wiped our Lord’s feet with her hair, she bound up her hair again and went about the house, doing the work that lay to her hand; but everywhere she went, the fragrance went with her! What a parable of the Christian’s life! Our lives, too, may be transformed by the beauty of Jesus. If we kneel before Him every day, desiring above everything else in life to do what He would have us do, allowing Him to direct and control our every impulse, then, no matter where we go, or what we do, others will “take note that we have been with Jesus.” (Acts 4:13)

Murillo, the famous seventeenth century painter, was visiting in a monastery on one occasion, when one morning he had an irresistible impulse to paint. He called for canvas, but

they had no artists' canvas in the monastery. They searched around, and at last came up with a piece of rough brown canvas, little better than sacking. That was all they had, but the artist took it, rough and coarse as it was, and stretching it across a board, he painted on it a priceless masterpiece which hangs today in Seville Cathedral. Some of our lives are rough and coarse material, yet Christ desires to paint His own likeness upon our souls. He desires so to fill us with His spirit, His love, His power, that our life and character might be like His.

2. Why are the robes of Christ fragrant with aloes?

Aloes are now known as eaglewood, and this wood is obtained from plants which grow in India and the Malay Peninsula. It also has been used in trade from early times and has always been a favorite with the Arabs. Incidentally, it has nothing to do with the bitter aloes of medicine which have no aroma. The fragrant parts of the wood are those which are diseased, and the fragrance is due to the presence of resin. And the development of the perfume in the wood is hastened by burying it in the ground.

This reminds us, does it not, that the glory of Christ's redeeming work is only fully understood in the light of His sufferings and death. He bore for us the effects of the disease called "sin." "He was crucified, dead and buried." Surely the aloes speak to us of the humiliation, suffering, death and burial of our Lord.

It is a biological fact that the lower animals do not experience pain to the same degree that human beings do. Because they are lower in the scale of life, their nervous systems do not respond so intensely to those stimuli which produce pain. The stroke of a whip to a horse, for example, causes less pain to the horse than it would to a woman, were she to receive it. For this very reason we could never comprehend fully the awful sufferings of Jesus, physical, emotional and spiritual He was Man, but He was also God, sinless and perfect, and therefore His capacity for suffering must have been infinitely greater than ours could ever be.

Did you ever realize that no artist could ever depict the Crucifixion scene as it actually happened? — the blood trickling down the face and body, the poor pain-drenched body itself stark naked, quivering upon the cross. The shame and degradation of it all! No shame upon Him, for He was the pure and holy Son of God; but to think that He, Who from all eternity had clothed Earth and Sky with beauty, should Himself hang unclothed between Earth and Sky, being reviled and humiliated by the very people He loved and had come to save! And then to think that all our sins, and all the agonies of earth and hell were lifted up and laid upon Him as He hung there, until with a final shudder, and a cry of absolute triumph, He exclaimed — "It is finished!", and yielded up His spirit.

Did He suffer all this in a spirit of stubbornness, or in order to be acclaimed a noble martyr? Au no!

When General William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, died in 1912, his passing was attended by world-wide manifestations of sorrow. One hundred and fifty thousand people filed past his casket to pay their last respects, and forty thousand people attended the funeral service. Near the back of the great Hall, in an aisle seat, sat a poor woman, clutching in

her hand three faded carnations. As the casket was wheeled up the aisle, she quietly reached out and reverently placed her flowers on the top of the casket, and they were the only flowers upon it throughout the service. Turning to the lady standing next to her, and with tears streaming down her cheeks, she exclaimed, “When he found me, I was a woman of the streets. He introduced me to Jesus, and the Savior made me a new person. William Booth lived and died for the likes of me!”

Can’t we all say that about our Lord? “He died for the likes of me!” He suffered and died because He wanted to pluck you and rue from death and hell and lift us to heaven; because we were blind, and He wanted us to see; because we were lost, and He wanted us to be found.

“See from His head, His hands, His feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down;
Did e’er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?”

Finally, we ask —

3. Why are the robes of Christ fragrant with cassia?

Cassia is a plant that grows in India and is used extensively in medicine. In an age when people knew little about pharmacy, cassia was used to arrest many forms of disease.

So, when Christ comes with garments fragrant with cassia it suggests to us the healing power of the Son of God. “But,” you say, “we are not ill. Why do we need cassia? It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick!” Let me ask you this question — “If God were to place a placard on your back, and on that placard write the ten worst things you have ever thought, or said, or done, would you care to be seen coming into this church wearing your placard? I wouldn’t. Listen to the way in which the prophet Isaiah diagnoses our condition: “Your whole head is injured, your whole heart afflicted. From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness — only wounds and welts and open sores, not cleansed or bandaged or soothed with oil.” (1:5-6). Yes, the tuberculosis of sin is upon us; the palsy and the leprosy and the blindness. And all the pages of the Bible are just so many prescriptions from the divine Physician, written, not in Latin, like the prescriptions of earthly doctors, but in good plain English so that “even the most stupid cannot miss the way.” (Isaiah 35:8). Thank God that the Savior’s robes are “fragrant with cassia,” for that is the hope of the world!

If someone has failed to take this healing medicine, then he is dying a death which will leave him finally separated from God for all eternity. Suppose a person were ill, and there was placed upon his bedside table medicine which was guaranteed to cure him, and he refused to take it. What would you say of such a person if he died? You would say he had committed suicide. And what do we say of the person who is offered the healing medicine of God’s grace in Christ, and refuses to take it? If he dies, he is a suicide. Some people talk as though God took a person and led him out to darkness and death; as though He brought him up to the edge of the cliff, and then pushed him off. Oh no! When a person is lost, it is not because God pushed him off; it is because he jumped off.

When our Lord was here on Earth, “all who had any sick people in their homes, no matter what their diseases were, brought them to Him; and the touch of His hands healed them every one!” (Luke 4:40). And the “Good News” is that He can do that for each one of us this very hour. We may come to Him in the quietness of this church; with our fears, our frustrations, our disappointments, and with our sins — all those things that make us feel miserable and wretched and ashamed — and we can receive His healing touch, His word of forgiveness. O Christ —

“Thy touch has still its ancient power
No word from Thee can fruitless fall;
Hear, in this solemn morning hour,
And in Thy mercy heal us all.”

And finally, according to our text, our Lord comes to us “out of the ivory palaces.” Many of the palaces of olden times were adorned with ivory; Ahab and Solomon had their palaces furnished with it; chairs and tables and floors and pillars of pure, snow-white ivory: what unspeakable beauty and magnificence! And here, in this Messianic psalm, we have a prophetic vision of Christ leaving the “ivory palaces” of heaven, to bring redemption to a sin-stained world. His mission accomplished, He has returned to heaven for a while, but the fragrance of His regal robes still remains.

What a place heaven must be! All the palaces of Earth are as dungeons compared to it. And Christ will one day return to receive those who are His, so that with Him they may enjoy the fellowship of heaven for all eternity.

But do remember — heaven is a prepared place for a prepared people. The Word of God is so specific about this — “Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who is immoral or dishonest; but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life.” (Revelation 21:27).

Is your name entered in that heavenly record, dear friend? Are you numbered among the blood-washed company of the redeemed? You have heard again today of the infinite beauty and perfection of the Savior’s character, of the unspeakable anguish He endured on your behalf, and of that healing which can be yours from the fatal disease of sin, as you reach out the hand of faith, and touch the hem of His seamless robe.

For very love’s sake, do what you know you ought to do — commit yourself to Him, body, mind and spirit, as He confronts you this morning in regal splendor — His “robes fragrant with myrrh, and aloes and cassia, out of the ivory palaces.”

AMEN.