

There is a perfume called ruthvah. It is one of the most expensive scents money can buy, which is no doubt why you haven't heard of it. Only rich people who are rich—and tasteless—enough can afford to buy it. For those who are gullible to such things; sorry to those who have been initiated into the secrets-they-don't-want-you-to-know, ruthvah is reputed to guarantee its wearer instant success with the opposite sex, the same sex or whichever sex your romantic core orients towards. If you are one of those people, don't tell anybody else, but I have a great investment opportunity for you... Ruthvah owes its reputation to its ingredients, which are ambergris, civet and musk which are respectively whale vomit, a secretion from the anal glands of a cat and an abdominal secretion of a deer. You think that's bad wait till you hear about *kopi luwak* coffee. Occasionally ruthvah is adulterated with the cheaper castoreum, which is derived from beaver b...its. You'd imagine that mixed together these select ingredients would adorn the wearer with the olfactory equivalent of being stuck in your car behind a bin lorry on the hottest day of the year, but no. It smells of... grrrrrr. Apparently. That's what the wearer thinks anyway: everybody else in the room is probably surreptitiously checking the bottom of their shoes.

*Lots of men- I did have a list of names there but decided there are better ways to offend the entire congregation in one go.- lots of men must regularly dowse themselves in ruthvah: that's the only way one can explain their otherwise inexplicable attraction to ostensibly sentient life forms.*

Anyway, that's ruthvah, a mixture of the least likely perfume ingredients you could imagine which, when combined together in the right quantities creates the most valuable of scents with, if the advertising is to be believed, a uniquely powerful effect on one's romantic popularity.

Thing is, ambergris, civet and musk are no more intrinsically disgusting substances than attar of roses, lavender oil or lily of the valley and it's just that we learn to find certain sources of scents to be desirable and others repulsive: a sweet smell is

subjective, beauty is in the nose of the beholder as anyone whose dog compulsively rolls in fox poo or rotting rabbit- all dogs basically- can tell you.

Now God has no nose; but is sometimes given one metaphorically and then he has a strange nose indeed. The things that appeal to him, biblically at least - turn out to be incense- hurrah- and then things that would turn our stomachs, like cows, pigeons and lambs, cut into pieces and burnt to a cinder. God works in mysterious ways and he really doesn't follow the rules of human etiquette.

Often we talk about God's love for what we think is small and insignificant:- he counts the hairs on your head, notices the sparrows falling from the tree; they're not insignificant of course, only to self-obsessed us. But what I want to think about today is God's love for what we think is vile and repulsive: not the mayflies and dandelion clocks of mankind but the whale barf and cat secretions of humanity, repulsive to us- and always sweet to God's nose.

There is a strand of Christian belief which runs along the lines of though you are foul and repulsive nevertheless God loves you. Once you know it's there, you notice it all the time. It's the bottom line of a lot of contemporary worship songs, and even the older ones:

*Foul, I to the fountain fly,*

Though you are foul and repulsive nevertheless God loves you. No. Not the case.

God does not see how vile you are but loves you anyway. God sees what others, and sometimes you yourself cannot see: that you are *not* foul and repulsive. Whatever you look like, whoever you love, whatever your attributes, whatever the world thinks or says about you, God looks at what he has made and sees that it is good. God delights in you. This is why it is always a scandal to the human world that God loves the outcast, the marginalised, the oppressed. How can he? How can he stand the stench?

I came of age in the 1980s. That was not a great era to grow up gay, it was the decade when things— which had just started to inch forward for LGBT people— started to go backwards. It was the era of Section 28 and ‘Don’t die of ignorance’ AIDS panic and Teddy Taylor and Margaret Thatcher telling us ‘ you do not have an inalienable right to be gay’ and ‘Eastbenders’ headlines in *The Sun* and panic about school libraries stocking ‘Jenny lives with Eric and Martin’ in the *Daily Mail* and on and on and on. I lost some twenty years of my life to mental health issues, because that’s what happens when your formative years are spent in a world that tells you it hates you. That’s what happens when you live with the permanent threat of violence, when queer-bashing is always just one wrong street away, when even your doctor puts ‘danger of infection’ stickers next to your name in her appointment book, because you have a boyfriend. Though the rainbow smells sweeter in much of British society now than it used to LGBT people are still met in many places, even in this country, like a proverbial bad smell, and one of the places where homophobic hate is holding on most tenaciously is the Christian church. About the only people still pumping out the poison in public are the Far Right... and Christians, Anglicans not excepted.

Which is what makes it all the more remarkable that LGBT Christians refuse to go away, still come to the churches, still end up sitting in pews and singing in church choirs and giving out hymn books and running Messy Church and sitting on PCCs and becoming Churchwardens and curates and Readers and SPAs and Rectors and Bishops. I can’t speak for everybody as to why that is, but I can speak for myself, and I can say that I’m here because the gospel message is clear that God has looked at the way he created me and my siblings and said that it is good. God’s acceptance is unconditional. God is never holding his nose. God’s love is for the outcast, the marginalised, the oppressed. When the world thinks you are beyond the pale, best kept behind closed doors; best legislated against or beaten up or thrown in prison; God doesn’t. That, trust me, is a powerful message to hear. The gospel preaches it, even if the Church doesn’t. No wonder LGBT Christians refuse to go away.

Did you hear that in the letter to the Ephesians? It was there.

*You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God*

You might be thinking ‘Rector’s being a bit self-obsessed here’ and wondering ‘what’s all this got to do with me?’

Here’s what it has to do with you.

First, if you want to love Jesus, you want to be like him which means loving what he loves. A bit like trying to learn the offside rule if your crush is a football obsessive. Love me, love what I love. The Syrophenician woman. The Gerasene demoniac. Mary Magdalene. The tax collectors. The woman caught in adultery. The waifs and strays. The stragglers and the oddities. The sick, the hungry, the strangers, the prisoners, the lost sheep. Love me, love my family.

And second.

Christians have to learn to live with the bad smells in the room, if for no other reason than so often they emanate from the elephant in the room, which is... that sometimes it’s you who is causing the stink.

*Do to others, as you would have them do to you.*

Those who have never been one of society’s pariahs are one slip away from becoming that person. You will almost certainly get old. You will get sick. When the landlord’s greed outstrips your capacity to pay the rent you will become homeless. Every day people lose their jobs. Every day happy marriages fall apart and the ranks of the divorced swell. Lives fall apart all the time, mental health frays and quickly unravels. We skip through life thinking it will never happen to us until it does, and, unceremoniously ejected from our bed of roses, suddenly we’re the bad smell in the room.

And.

If, and when that happens.

When the smiles on the face of the world are no longer friendly.

When the world shakes its fist at you rather than shakes your hand.

When the doors you never even noticed were held open for you are slammed in your face.

When the politeness evaporates and they don't even bother to hide their contempt.

When the world holds its nose when you're in the room.

There is one person whose arms are always open wide in welcome.

One person who knows absolutely, just how valuable, how precious, how beautiful you truly are.