Maundy Thursday

One of the key features of Maundy Thursday services is the re-enacting of the foot-washing that Jesus did for his 12 disciples. It can’t of course be done this year, but had congregations been gathering in their churches this evening, many of them would have included foot washing as part of the liturgy. 12 people (if possible) would have offered, or been persuaded, to sit in a semi-circle and take shoe and sock off one of their feet and have it symbolically washed, usually by the parish priest who takes the role of Jesus. It’s an act of service - an act of love, indeed - that supposedly helps us to enter more deeply into the story that we heard in our gospel reading of Jesus’s last meal with his friends before his death.

I say ‘supposedly’, because for quite a few years now I’ve struggled with this particular piece of liturgy. It’s not because I don’t get the point of it, nor because I find it vaguely embarrassing (which I do, though that’s an irrelevance). It’s because it’s invariably the vicar or an ordained minister that takes the part of Jesus. Now I do understand that priests are seen as the spiritual leaders of a church or group of churches. And I do accept that at the Eucharist especially, priests stand ‘in persona Christi’ - as the person of Christ - representing Jesus in a symbolic way for the people of God as they gather around the altar and the words and actions of the Last Supper are re-enacted.

However, if the person taking the part of Jesus in the foot washing is *always* the ordained person, then we risk saying (albeit subconsciously and perhaps unintentionally) that the laity, the people of God cannot be Jesus or can’t be Jesus as well as or as fully as the ordained person. It’s rather like the parish priest I knew who always insisted on being Jesus in the dramatic reading of the Passion on Palm Sunday. Why? Can a member of the congregation not stand in that role? If the people of God are called to be Christ to one another and to love one another as Jesus loves them, then surely any one of us, lay or ordained, can be Jesus as feet are washed on Maundy Thursday - and the priest could be one of the disciples and have her or his foot washed alongside their people.

One of my favourite prayers is that of Theresa of Avila which encapsulates this nicely:

‘Christ has no body now on earth, but yours; no hands, but yours, no feet, but yours. Yours are the eyes with which he looks with compassion on the world; yours are the feet with which he walks to do good; yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world.’

Each of us is equally capable - equally called indeed - to be Christ to and for one another. So perhaps next year, when (please God) we can meet again in our church buildings for Maundy Thursday, some of our congregations might consider having a lay person to wash the feet of the chosen 12.

But there is something else, that we all have to be careful of. And that’s becoming servants who struggle to receive. As followers of Jesus, we’re called to serve, of course. We’re encouraged to pattern our lives on the servant king, the servant of the servants, the one came not to be served but to serve. And that we do, by the grace of God. But this can easily tip over into being the person who does all the giving; someone who can’t allow others to give to them. For some of us, I guess, it can be a point of pride that we are the ones that do the giving. For others, it may be that our sense of self-worth is so low that we feel we don’t deserve, and therefore can’t accept, what others might want to give us. We’re called to be servants, yes. But part of that is having the grace to allow others to serve us. Generosity of spirit is not just one way.

This inability or reluctance to receive can spill over into our relationship with God. There’s a wonderful poem by George Herbert that captures this beautifully: Love bade me welcome, which you may well know. In the poem, Love is Jesus, inviting the soul (us) to a banquet. But although the soul comes to the door, she is reluctant to enter because of her sense of unworthiness. So aware is she of her unkindness and ingratitude, her guilt and sin, that she can’t even look Love in the eye. And when Love eventually persuades her to come in, rather than taking her place at the table, she insists on serving. Only in the very last line does she accept Love’s invitation to sit and eat, to receive and be fed.

The themes of Maundy Thursday are many and rich: loving, serving, and the sacrament of communion, thanksgiving, sacrifice and remembrance. And it ends, for tonight at least, with the watch in Gethsemane. There’s a long way to go to Easter. May we use this gift of time to reflect on what it means to love and to be loved, to serve and to be served, to give and to receive, after the pattern of Jesus.

*+Cherry*

**Love**

Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,

Guilty of dust and sin.

But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack

From my first entrance in,

Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,

If I lacked anything.

A guest, I answer’d, worthy to be here:

Love said, You shall be he.

I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,

I cannot look in thee.

Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,

Who made the eyes, but I?

Truth, Lord, but I have marr’d them: let my shame

Go where it doth deserve.

And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?

My dear, then I will serve.

You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:

So I did sit and eat.

*George Herbert.*