A REFLECTION FOR MAUNDY THURSDAY

One of the most attractive facets of Jesus’ human personality was the joy and inspiration he seems to have drawn from people around him, whether his joy at the safe return of the 72, or his marvelling at people’s faith, particularly that of gentiles.

I was a bit sceptical, at first, listening to a sermon on a Radio 4 Sunday morning service, when the preacher suggested that the inspiration for washing his disciples’ feet may have come to Jesus through the act of worship bestowed on him by Mary of Bethany when anointing his own feet with expensive perfume that was most likely to have been her dowry. In what is probably some kind of ecstatic state, Mary is effectively sacrificing her prospect of marriage; but far more significantly, by loosening her hair and wiping his feet with it, she’s performing an act of intimacy by surrendering her whole person, body and soul, to Jesus; Jesus clocks the symbolic meaning of Mary’s actions straight away, which is why he acknowledges its absolute spiritual priority over an act of charity to the poor, however costly: shades of the widow and her mite.

The disciples are never in doubt for a moment that Jesus remains their Lord, even while dispensing with his cloak – his one essential worldly possession, and relinquishing every earthly vestige of authority and status by performing the act of a slave – a non-person in the society in which he lived. Peter doesn’t get the paradox, because he doesn’t fully understand the symbolic meaning of what Jesus is doing, and perhaps we don’t quite get it either. Paul speaks of Jesus emptying himself by taking the nature of a slave, which is immensely meaningful, but when we are reminded that a slave really was a non-person – an item of property - a useful chattel that their owner was legally free to dispose of as he or she wished – that is the full significance of Jesus’ self-sacrifice to his disciples and to us. The disciples probably get the societal implication of what Jesus has done for them, but they’re still actors in the drama, and they don’t see the whole thing as John wants us to see it.

I also think there’s a sense in which if we only see God formally through the church, we’re almost certain to lose the essential dynamic of intimacy in all of this, and today we are not even able to undergo the act itself, or share its important coruscations together. But even if, as T S Eliot puts it, we don’t have the experience itself, there is no reason why we should therefore miss its meaning. There exists a new intimacy among us, with the exchange of phone-calls and other technical wizardry, and a renewed and very real need to be close to one another.

The washing of our feet is probably the nearest the institutional church comes to intimacy among adults during the whole church year, but together the sum of our parts can well exceed the institutional church if that is how we resolve to be church together. We should not forget the other act of intimacy in the church year, however; the imposition of ashes; the vital importance of which David emphasized at the time.

At the beginning of Lent we receive the ashes so to remind us who and what we are; and that we need to get closer – more intimate – with God during this season of self-discipline and examination of conscience. Our feet are usually washed by our leaders as an act of humility on their part, but also on ours, as we slightly embarrass ourselves in the cause of what is taught as Christian humility. But it’s more than that: it’s also symbolic of our leaders’ self-abnegation and re-dedication to the people they serve; something that is being expressed today by different means, but with no less heart.

But the foot-washing is also what it is: the washing clean of our feet. In a time of pedicures and all kinds of foot care being advertised on tele, most of us still rather take the care of our feet for granted. Here it’s only too obvious and rather ‘cheesy’ if that is not too awful a pun – to TRAVEL seamlessly from the soles of our feet into our souls proper, and ask if perhaps we also tend to neglect the care of them. It is appropriate, then, at this time, that the church traditionally offers the opportunity for people to confess and acknowledge our failings to a minister, in the assurance of God’s mercy, understanding and forgiveness. Many of us will have all sorts of difficulties thrown up to us as the result of lock-down and isolation, so it’s timely to remind everyone that empathetic listening is still available at the end of a telephone; and anxieties and confession can always be heard in confidence if and when that becomes necessary.

It’s drilled into us, often as a misguided mission strategy, that we’re all sinful creatures, and in need of God’s grace and redemption. This is, of course, a fundamental truth of our faith, but nobody seems ever to explain why that is. So here goes.

Firstly, and most importantly, original sin of itself has nothing to do with any personal wrong-doing on our part, although its consequences discolour our minds and spirits, and divert us, through various early unconscious strategies of self-will, from the grace of God.

Imperfections and defects in our genetic inheritance; harm, deprivation and emotional damage inflicted on us by others, knowingly or unknowingly in earliest childhood, when we are unable to defend ourselves, generates unconscious mental strategies for avoiding fear, pain or anxiety that the conscious mind of an infant cannot bear to deal with.Fr Richard Rohr calls these strategies ‘programmes for happiness,’ but that’s precisely what they turn out not to be, because, in the words of Abbot Thomas Keating,

The urgent need to escape from the profound insecurity of this situation gives rise, when unchecked, to insatiable desires for pleasure, possessions and power. On the social level it gives rise to violence, war and institutional injustice.

I suspect the reason why we don’t talk about it is that the time and place it most often comes to the surface is at the sacrament of baptism, when we don’t want to frighten parents and family members with all this, so we call it the world, the flesh and the Devil. In fact, of course, there is no need to go into all this stuff at baptism, because that’s precisely the time when we celebrate Paul’s wonderful dictum that where sin abounds, grace super-abounds. Baptism is the sacrament at which the whole church affirms that one of God’s children has been placed directly under his care and protection from the worst consequences of all this.

Abbot Thomas goes on to state: that ‘Grace is the presence and action of Christ at every moment of our lives. To put it in terms intended, no doubt, for children, Jesus knocks on the door of our hearts, and as we grow in faith, we come to wonder at the many and varied ways He chooses to do so. We can be perfectly sure of God’s mercy, faithfulness and forgiveness because, in whatever confusion or fear we come to him, it is He who writes the social and psychiatric reports.

**A PASTORAL PRAYER OF AELRED OF RIEVAULXE**

Lord, look at my soul’s wounds, Your living and affective eye sees everything.

It pierces like a sword, even to part asunder soul and spirit.

Assuredly, my lord, you see in my soul the traces of my former sins,

My present sins, my present perils,

And also motives and occasions for others yet to be.

You see these things, Lord, and I would have you see them.

You know well, O searcher of my heart,

That there is nothing in my soul that I would hide from you,

Even had I the power to escape your eyes.

So see me, sweet Lord, see me.

My hope, most merciful, is in your lovingkindness.

For you will see me, either as a good physician sees,

Intent upon my healing,

Or else as a kind master, anxious to correct,

Or a forbearing father, longing to forgive.

[Taken from Celebrating the Saints, published by the Church of England.]