

Maundy Thursday 2024

We are on the move and the move is towards death and resurrection, but we need to take that word 'death' seriously before we take the edge off it with the word 'resurrection'; there's an equality about it which none of us can escape; an equality which Jesus himself cannot escape and which, in a sense, completes his journey with us as a fully en-fleshed human being, to the point of letting that life go, that breath of the spirit, for the sake of others. And in John's gospel we see this sacrament of self-giving made visible in his washing of his disciples' feet. Much is made of this as being an action so lowly that it wasn't even demanded of a slave; one can say that, of course, also of a crucifixion. So it's a dying to self which cannot be surpassed. We referenced Diogenes on Sunday as an exemplar of symbolic actions or, better, very real actions symbolic of our true state before one another. By speaking truth to power he insists on our fundamental equality before one another and before God – or perhaps 'gods' in his case. I think Jesus is doing something of this here but, far from being a demeaning exercise, it reveals our true nobility: all made in the image of a God who loves us; who knows what it is to love; who knows how to serve us to the ultimate degree. Later, Jesus will say to his disciples:

I no longer call you slaves (or servants) because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father.

Jesus loves us and so shows us what true friendship, true equality, before God and before each other, means. It's a commentary on the Eucharist as a radical celebration of friendship where no one is to be excluded from God's love, that is, not from *our* service of God but of God's service of *us*. We need to be reminded of this because, like Peter, we so often get it wrong. At the end of Diarmud McCulloch's magnificent History of Christianity, a catalogue of disaster as much as victory, there's a sentence which may, perhaps, sum it all up, referring to the conflicts in the former communist states of Eastern Europe and Serbia in particular:

Some may find it depressing that after seeing the collapse of traditional European Christendom, so many Christianities are still entwined with the politics of the powerful, but it is surely inevitable that any potential source of power will fascinate fallen humanity, and that religion is as likely to bring a sword as peace. (p. 1008)

So Christ brings us to the table once again and breaks bread with us to show us how it's done: how peace, that is, is done. And to take us, too, into the movement of his own self-offering.

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