

A Meditation for Maundy Thursday

Angus Stuart

TONIGHT, AS WE CONTINUE our observation of Holy Week, following Jesus on his path to Calvary tomorrow and awaiting the resurrection on Sunday, we are remembering his last supper with his disciples. The last time Jesus sat down with his disciples, as he had many times before, his last words to them as teacher and his last acts with them. They were perhaps unaware at the time that this was in fact the last supper – its significance only became apparent to them later. Jesus himself, perhaps plagued by uncertainty as to what exactly would happen next, nevertheless was conscious that his hour had come. We mark this night conscious of its weight of moment.

The Last Supper. The Gospels give us two pictures of what happened at the supper – two stories that complement one another. One tells us who we are (gives us identity), the other tells how to relate to one another (how to live out this identity). The synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark & Luke) tell us of the meal where he took bread, broke it and gave it to them saying, “Take this and eat it. This is my body. Do this in remembrance of me.” And again, he took a cup of wine and gave it to them saying, “Drink this wine. This is my blood of the New Covenant. Do this in remembrance of me.” And from this we have our tradition of the Eucharist – Holy Communion, the Lord’s Supper – which we are also sharing and celebrating tonight.

“Do this in remembrance of me.” He said. That is how we translate it in English. The Greek word used in the New Testament is *anamnesis* (we have lost track of the Aramaic that Jesus spoke) – *anamnesis* means more than recalling or bringing to mind a person or an event that happened long ago. *Anamnesis* is about entering into the reality of that past event – making it real now, in the present moment. There is a time collapse such that when we celebrate the Eucharist we are not divided from Jesus by time, but that we are there with him in the upper room and he is here with us now.

And so in obedience to his words we share bread amongst us, and we share wine – it is a sacrament: an outward manifestation of an inward reality. And more than this it tells us who we are – it is about our identity as Christians, both individually and, as the Church, together. “This is my body,” he said. And we say, “We are the body of Christ.” We partake of his body and we become his body – we are to actualise his presence on earth to today. “This is my blood” – blood means life: as we take his blood into our bodies so we drink in his life – our life becomes one with his, we become one with him, and thereby of course, one with each other. Crudely: you are what you eat – share of his body and blood and embody his presence here on earth today. For he has no hands but ours, no feet but ours, no ears or eyes or mouth but ours....

The Last Supper: we share bread and wine. It is his body and blood. It tells us who we are and gives us identity: his identity – Christ.

That's the tradition of Matthew, Mark and Luke – and we celebrate it week by week in the Eucharist. A sacrament. But in John's Gospel we find another picture: the story of the foot-washing – how Jesus got up from the table, put a towel around him and began to wash the disciples' feet. And he says to them, "Do you know what I have done for you? ... I have given you an example. As I have done for you, so you should do for one another." The Greek word here is *hypodeigma* – it means 'pattern,' like a dressmaker's pattern: it's a way of being and acting, a way of relating to one another. In the washing of the feet Jesus is showing his disciples how they are to relate to each other, how they are to act towards one another. By extension it gives us a pattern for how the Church is to live, and how we are to relate to each other in the Church and, taking it wider still, how we as human beings are to relate to one another – for the Church itself is to be a pattern for humanity, a living out of the Gospel, a demonstration of life in the kingdom of God.

It's a pattern of service – of serving one another and of allowing others to serve us, possibly more difficult than actually serving others ourselves. But what does this 'pattern' of service actually mean for us? Tonight we shall act out the washing of the feet as a way of entering into the drama of what happened that night – but this in itself is not the pattern. It's a representation but it's not the thing itself – it's not a

sacrament, like the Eucharist, that embodies that which it is pointing towards. It is not about literally washing one another's feet because that is not culturally relevant – that's not what we do in this culture, in this country today.

So what is the pattern that we are to follow – how does it work out in practice for us? What *would* be culturally relevant? I've thought about this, and I have not really come up with anything that would not be either a vague generality, or something so specific as to appear trivial when taken out of context. And I am conscious that it is presumptuous even for me to be standing here asking the question – I'm aware that many here among us have been working out the answer to this in their own lives for years – and each of us has to work out what it means for us ourselves in our own contexts and in the relationships we find ourselves in. But we may have some clues if we ask what this pattern of service is not and what prevents us from following it.

First off, although it's a call to humble service, it's not about making a martyr of yourself. There's a line in a T-Bone Burnett song that says: when you know you're being humble ... you're not humble anymore. It's not about playing Jesus to one another in a self-conscious aren't-I-so-good-and-humble attitude of mind. There needs to be a lighter touch, more unselfconscious – a hiddenness, an obliviousness even to how we are acting. When we become aware of it, it tends to evaporate.

What prevents us from following this pattern of service? What prevents us

from serving others? And what prevents us from allowing us to accept the service of others? The answer's easy: *pride*. Pride both overestimates and underestimates our own importance. We either think we're too good to get our hands dirty doing what needs to be done ... whatever that is. Or we have that false-humility that on the surface thinks we are not good enough, not worthy to be served but actually underneath secretly thinks we are too good to be served, to have to actually be humble enough to accept the service of another. We saw it in Peter when Jesus came to wash his feet – and of course he then had to go overboard the other way – but that's how it is with all of us to a greater or lesser extent: we either sit there not acting, not serving, because we hope someone else will do it first or we get embarrassed because someone does. Human nature. Pride overestimates who we are.

The problem, again, is self-consciousness – being conscious of our 'selves,' being too aware of our 'selves.' Actually pride is to do with a false, fictional identity – the person we

pretend to be, the person we like to convey to the world, the person whose cover is at constant risk of being blown because it is not real. It is not our true identity. Pride underestimates who we are.

Our true identity is Christ. Christ is the person we are meant to be and, deep down, most truly are. Christ – the perfect image of God – is the one in whom our true identity is hidden. So it comes back to our identity – which is revealed to us in the mystery of the Eucharist: this is my body, this my blood – that is who we are, and the pattern of the foot-washing shows how we are to live out this identity of being Christ ministering to Christ – not playing at being Jesus, but being Christ and recognising Christ in others and drawing forth his image by the Christ in us loving the Christ in others. The Christ in me loving the Christ in you, and the Christ in you loving the Christ in me.

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from Merton's letter to Jim Forest

"Do not depend on the hope of results. When you are doing the sort of work you have taken on, essentially an apostolic work, you may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect. As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself. And there too a great deal has to be gone through, as gradually you struggle less and less for an idea and more and more for specific people. The range tends to narrow down, but it gets much more real. In the end, it is the reality of personal relationships that saves everything..." (*from The Hidden Ground of Love, Letters by Thomas Merton, edited by William Shannon.*)