

Maundy Thursday 2015

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You may have seen what I think is a very powerful advert on TV at the moment. It is for the cancer charity Macmillan. In the adverts a person is shown alone and exposed in a cold, harsh and deserted place. The person looks understandably distressed, but then we hear a voice calling their name and the scene melts to a more everyday one of a café or a hospital waiting room. The person is a cancer sufferer and the voice is one of warmth and friendship. Each advert ends with the comforter placing their hand on the back or arm of the person in distress. The image, the action, is very moving. Someone touching and someone being touched.

The advert has stayed with me as I have thought about the Gospel we have heard to tonight and the foot washing that will follow this sermon. I have been trying to think of a modern day comparably intimate habit or ritual to the washing of feet. Something everyday enough that it happens each time we have a guest to our house but involving the level of human contact shown in the handling of another person's feet. I cannot find a parallel in my own social or cultural context - even if nowadays we often kiss or air kiss new acquaintances where we once just shook their hands. Only one thing occurred to me, something that happens most often not at home but in restaurants, or at least some restaurants. The moment not at the beginning but at the end of an evening where someone on the door holds wide your coat and as you back into it, putting your arms in the sleeves, eases it over your shoulders and more often than not puts that tiny pressure on them that wraps you up and sends you cosily on your way. I have noticed it also when sitting in a too hot theatre or on a too hot plane or train, when an unknown hand helps you in your Houdini like attempt to extricate yourself from your cardigan. A brief, tending gesture.

What I am noticing here of course is that fleeting moment of another's care. Impersonal as the relationship is, the happenstance of sitting next to someone or working that shift in the restaurant, the action is intensely personal. It is about making someone comfortable.

Dressing and undressing not in any "nudge nudge" sense but just simply response to a fellow human's situation.

This kind of simple care often has a real loveliness to it. We need to tread carefully though as not everyone welcomes this. Not everyone's experience of such things has been the same. For most of us though there is something maternal or paternal in the tidying up of us. Something childlike in letting ourselves be helped in this way. Moments when we forget what very independent people we are and we let another look after us for a bit. Like our feet or our hands being washed tonight.

It could be argued though that I am over romanticising the foot-washing. First century Jerusalem was nothing like 21st century Ealing Broadway you might well tell me. People in those days led lives far more physically connected to each other, far more viscerally and intimately connected. This is undeniably true. It is also probable though both from contemporary accounts and the story as we have just heard it read to us tonight that what happens during the foot washing is not by any means commonplace. The disciples Jesus gathered at the Last Supper came as they say "from all walks of life" but most were from rather humbler walks than loftier ones. They were used to washing the dust from their own feet before they sat down to eat, but they probably did not come from backgrounds where the household servant or slave did it for them. It seems likely that those gathered that first Maundy Thursday had already washed their own feet as they arrived, for it says quite clearly

in John's account (and his is the only one we have of the foot washing) that Jesus did this DURING the supper. He is making explicit that this activity has a meaning beyond its practical one. It is pointed out very importantly that Jesus is modelling the service that he is calling the disciples to follow him in. But this is not just a ritual either. Peter's feet are really being cleaned. Held, washed and dried by Jesus.

What is happening is suggestive of big things to come. but it is also about small things, small comforts and care then and there. I have often thought about Jesus as he washes these men's feet. Taking them in his hands and blessing them. All the love he has for them poured out here in this simple act as well as in the bread and wine on the table and all that will happen when a new day dawns. This is certainly in the Gospel account, and I am going to dare to suggest something else too. Jesus is receiving comfort from this simple contact with those who have travelled the road of his earthly ministry with him. Later, they will sleep when they should be stay awake. Deny when they should affirm. Betray when they should love. But now one by one he holds them close. If we are to believe that Jesus was human and in every way like us yet without sin, if we are to believe that the agony in the garden of Gethsemane was real, then we can believe that Jesus felt the need for the warmth and reassurance of human contact.

And if Jesus needed that warmth because he was with us as one of us, how can we pretend to get along without it.

It is one of my pet theories that as we come into warm physical contact with fewer and fewer people in any meaningful sense - a hundred friends on facebook but no one to come for tea - we seek warmth in other ways. I notice the sheer number of manicurists and beauticians on the average High Street. Perhaps a symptom of the narcissism of our age, perhaps more to the deeper need to be safely held and tended. Harmless perhaps. But I think too of the terrible stories of children in Rotherham, Oxford, who looked in dangerous places for someone to hold and care for them. Children whom we dare to call "in care" when that is the very thing they so desperately lack. For older people denied the dignity of tenderness by the ticking clockwatching of "social care". For the abused, the vulnerable, the appalling waste of sad and lonely lives.

Dark, difficult things for a dark, difficult night. What Jesus did was to reach out a hand in the darkness. To touch people's lives yes, but also to touch people's hands, eyes, faces and feet. Tomorrow we will recall when hands took him and nailed him to a cross. Tonight we wait with him in the darkness.

As we wait let us ask him how he wants us to show his love with each other. What having our hands or feet washed tonight will mean for us. To whom are we called to comfort. How will our touch bring his warmth to a cold world tonight.

Amen