Maundy Thursday Chrism Mass 050412

I enjoy the novels of the American author Garrison Keillor. He writes with affection of the Lutheran communities of Minnesota – solid people of Norwegian origin with the church at the centre of their lives. I pose as being rather less ‘touchy-feely’ than some of you – so I particularly savour his description of the large, black lady pastor who used to ‘squeeze members of her congregation at the Peace as if testing them for ripeness.’

Elsewhere he tells the story of his uncle who, at annual family gatherings during Holy Week, would read the story of the Passion and the death of Jesus. And each year, when he came to the verses describing Jesus’s betrayal, he would burst into tears. The family would sit awkwardly until he was able to continue. Keillor commented that his uncle took the death of his Lord ‘so personally’ He’d pause and then add, ‘The rest of the church had gotten over that years ago.’

Maundy Thursday is heavy with symbolism. It is part of the inexorable movement of Jesus towards the Cross. It’s the day on which Jesus washed the disciples’ feet. I shall always remember being with Rachel Mash, now Director of the Fikela Aids Project which is the subject of our Lent Appeal, washing broad and calloused black feet in cheap pink plastic basins on Maundy Thursday in a South African township. And it’s the institution of the Lord’s Supper.

But let’s return to the challenge of the personal …. I want to reflect in two ways on that. If ‘getting over it’ means that we have distilled Jesus into a depersonalised set of values, ideas and aspirations, then we have lost something. And I am very aware that one of the reasons why we may do that is because the alternative so often is encountered as faith which has been shrunk to a narrow, personalised and individualised message which seems more to exclude than to draw in.

You cannot stand here at this moment in Holy Week without recognising that our faith is stunningly relational and personal. The feet washing is uncomfortably intimate. The Last Supper – the gathering around the table - is of its essence relational. And then he says, ‘the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves.’ In those actions, Jesus sets up the most fundamental expressions of our faith as personal and relational. The rest of the Holy Week story moves us to tears precisely because it is so personal – Jesus silently withstands challenge, trial and mockery. He is betrayed by Judas, denied by Peter and deserted by the friends on whom he depended most. Personal pain, loss, loneliness accompany him on his obedient and uncomplaining path to sacrifice and death.

Which brings me to the second thing which I want to say – which is about what this means for us in our journey of vocation, ordination and ministry. When our daughter Anna graduated in Medicine at Queen’s University Belfast, I remember Prof Stout, the Dean of the Faculty, saying something like this: ‘Be aware .. in the past medicine could do very little and it was very safe. Today it can do many wonderful things and it is very dangerous.’ Here’s a ‘something like’ parallel. In my years in Ireland, I experienced much of the life of the Church of Ireland as stable, ordered and predictable. And its ministry does not seem to be in crisis. Our church is often edgy and contested. And our ministry is sometimes in difficulty.’ Many of you will know that I am very concerned about that as a feature of the life of this diocese and the wider church. I am particularly concerned about the pain of that and the cost of it in the lives of clergy and their families.

The ministry of Christ in which we share is deeply personal. Ministry is with people. We welcome our vocation and rejoice in it. But it is a difficult way of life. I would be surprised if your experience is very different from mine – but I find myself regularly challenged, disbelieved, misrepresented. Occasionally I am threatened. And so I am sure are you. To say that we ‘take that personally’ would imply that we get childishly upset. It’s not that – but we would be less than the followers of Jesus if we did not experience our share of personal pain and hurt at what happens around us and to us. I believe that our calling is to a new depth and strength of personhood. I used the word ‘withstand’ of Jesus under trial and torture. It is not the best word when it is applied to us. It sounds like waves battering on unyielding rock. Withstanding for me means that we, like Jesus, hold ourselves in the strength which comes from obedience to God. We remain open as we withstand. We hold ourselves in such a way that those who would challenge us are cannot do other than reflect on the faith-dimension of what they are doing. It is the ‘father forgive them for they know not what they do’ stance. It does not rebuff but draws people into spiritual growth and learning. It is what led the Centurion to say, ‘Truly this was the Son of God.’

As we come to renew our ordination vows, we put that deeply personal approach to ministry and its challenges in a particular context. Commonly we call it priestly formation – that we take the gift of vocation which we have received. We commit ourselves to life-long patterns of learning, training, shaping and moulding after the pattern of Christ – so that we may become – personal again – the best representatives of Christ we can be along whatever Calvary road we are called to follow.