Maundy Thursday April 6th 2023: Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin

The predictable character of The Footwashing can easily enable us to switch off at precisely the moment when we hear it or indeed read it. The good thing is the clear and obvious sense of what it contributes to our understanding of the last days and hours of Jesus Christ as he concentrates the minds of the disciples on what lies ahead of them. It is memorable also for the combination of foreboding and compassion and, for the theologically minded among us, the way in which all of this issues in glorification and how this is both a lucid revelation and a perpetual challenge. At precisely the same moment our faith makes greatest sense and also makes no real sense but somehow we feel it must make best sense. There is no avoiding the impact of St John 13.31b: *Then Jesus said, Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him …*

I encourage you who are here as priests, deacons and lay ministers to read this story again each day during this period of The Triduum, the three days of suffering and of sanctity, that lead us to Easter Day; I also encourage you who are here as people of God, what the ordained quaintly call lay people as if we too are not part of the *laos* that is the people of God, to read it also because it is a gift of discipleship in the heart of Jesus long before it is a claim of clericalism. It is one of those passages of Holy Scripture that binds us all together is what I can only call our Christ-ism. And on Maundy Thursday this matters.

There is something in this long Gospel Reading from St John 13 that sprung out at me and that is the deliberate singling out of, the focusing on, the towel:

*Jesus got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself.*

*Jesus began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.*

This same Jesus is now clothed with glory and so is his Father; well of course they are, because The Gospel of St John presupposes an early but sophisticated understanding of God as Trinity. Let us, in the reflective resonance of this cathedral space which is ours today during the daytime in a very special way, think of how Jesus has been clothed. Jesus was first clothed in swaddling clothes by his mother Mary, and with a little help from the shepherds. The tight wrapping of the limbs of the special lamb for sacrifice applied to the child ensured that this tiny creature would be and would remain unblemished for perfect sacrifice. On Christmas Eve this pointed us towards atonement, the restoration of right relationship between us and God brought about in a way that is not a transaction but a grace on which we have no entitlement to place any limitations.

There is, of course, a long journey from The Stable of Bethlehem to The Upper Room in Jerusalem. There are, so to speak, many changes of clothing for the Son of God and the Son of Man. Throughout his public ministry, Jesus is clothed in the service of healing, teaching and preaching, wearing the everyday clothing of a Palestinian man of his day; The Scriptures are clear that he seeks to include and to incorporate others in all of these gifts of service, these Godly normalities; this must be the inspiration of us all on Maundy Thursday too. Entering Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Jesus is clothed in majesty as he lives out in graphic and pictorial form the Hymn of His Mother Mary whose soul magnified the Lord; he does this by accepting and proclaiming publicly the kingship of the marginalized and their robing him in anoraks and fleeces and t-shirts and hoodies and the like as he enters Jerusalem on a donkey. Jesus is yet again to be clothed by Roman soldiers, with the connivance of the Jewish High Priests, in purple robes and in a crown not of gold but of thorns as a royal pretender deserving penetrating pain rather than glittering gems. And, finally, in what we call Good Friday, Jesus is clothed in a loin cloth as he carries his own cross and as he hangs on his own cross for the atonement and the redemption of the world. The swaddling clothes have gone full circle. Sacrifice is offered. Salvation of assured. The clothes carry the story and are the clue to each step.

Each of us will single out something special to us in this towel-service on Maundy Thursday. The elasticity of Maundy Thursday rightly speaks to each one of us as we settle and centre our journey here in Christ Church Cathedral this morning. There is one final suggestion that I have to make. Not only has Simon Peter gone into overdrive; Judas Iscariot has not left the room. This gives everyone hope. Jesus Christ has the instinct to serve both the patron of elated exuberance and the patron of cunning concealment. Commitment and collusion are both cleansed by The Son of Man and The Son of God using a towel. In this act of extraordinary service, there is healing, teaching and preaching. It never was in the power of Jesus to force anyone to receive any of these or indeed to be thanked. The healing, teaching and preaching have not changed but Lordship has changed. While it is the same Lord in whose name the prophets in The Old Testament spoke up for the excluded, the Incarnate Lord includes the evil and the enthusiastic in something the prophets could not directly offer, namely salvation. This too is part of what it is to be clothed in glory on Maundy Thursday – for us to be clothed in glory.

None of us is perfect. This is a truism of truisms. On Maundy Thursday, God invites us to be clothed in the towel of service, the towel of righteousness and the towel of generosity. While it may indeed be a step too far for some of us, and understandably, others of us may like to give it a try it is the first step of these Three Days leading to Easter Day.