

Maundy Thursday

To taste

“..a mask to hide behind, to shield me from the glance that knows..”

Exodus journey 1300yrs before Christ..chosen people tribal and prayerful servants little people who threatened Pharaoh and his people by their difference..tribal care, mutual support, together united..believers in faith..practitioners of goodness, of self sacrificial service..and feared by status quo, the rich powerful owners and controllers, and enslaved oppressed by Pharaoh..more bricks less straw..and what frightened terrified him and his government, and the affluent “haves” was that clearly a God..their God..was on their side..

..And after plagues destructions signs and miracles he let them go..the exodus journey.. their God was with them every step of the way..40yrs in desert..fed watered guided protected encouraged inspired..trials threats battles famines, hopeless moments and episodes, yet never deserted..guided protected from a distance through intermediaries through human divinely inspired little people shepherds sycamore tree growers elderly barren women, young virgins..Moses Elijah and the prophets..”not I Lord surely?”..

Exodus journey in Ukraine; chosen people, deep sense of history proud tradition of independence prosperity learning and community..and their value-added which Putin never estimated..believers..a simple life of mutual support and co-dependency..a war which began 20 Feb 2014 with Russia invading Eastern Ukraine 8yrs 2months of trench warfare..and now just 50days today since

24 Feb 2022 when Pharaoh Putin invaded whole of Ukraine..to take control and to enslave its people..

And our Exodus begins here and now..three days; us a chosen people, with a deep sense of community, co-dependency, learning “semper reformanda”; our lives changed and still changing radically by plague called coronavirus..life-threatening, life-taking..

no blood painted on our doorposts; none of us immune from its effects, in faith in community in parish in family, and in our own individual growth in life faith and social economic and financial relationships..some of us here tonight food and energy poor..and most of us here tonight spiritually poor undernourished and now challenged to take off our mask our pretence my parade of masks “a façade of assurance without, and a trembling child within”..

“semper reformanda” as Ukraine war affects each of us..participants not spectators..

we ask “Lord what about us?” we ask it timidly half heartedly hoping for a soft easy non-demanding option..like a weak Lenten resolution..or a get out clause if we show our blue disabled badge, or an over 70’s driving licence..

and he says to each and all of us here tonight..with no exceptions, no exemptions, no conscientious objectors as with the covid jab..he puts it plainly simply with bluntness of a Yorkshireman..and with a Yorkshire accent..West Riding not North Riding..

“feed my sheep”..

..tonight the night of the meal..”feed my sheep”..”do this in memory of me”..

“become what you receive, the Body of Christ” [St Augustine]..

..in wider community in covid, the only time only exemption from wearing our face mask, has been when we sit down to eat..56yrs ago never mind 2ys ago we were experiencing difficulties with face masks..a poem was composed in an attempt to acknowledge the problem, the virus, the “dis-ease”..the pretence the hypocrisy the self-distancing and the “theatre of dreams”..

For anyone interested in football, Old Trafford the home to Man Utd, was named somewhat arrogantly “the theatre of dreams” and on current performance and the ongoing disillusionment of their supporters, and to the delight of the rest of us, it is light years away from possibility and reality..

Listen please to this poem as you are introduced to someone you might well know..

Don't be fooled by me..

Don't be fooled by me, and don't be fooled by the masks that I wear.

For I wear a thousand masks that I am afraid to take off, and none of them are me.

Pretending is an act that is second nature to me, but don't be fooled for God's sake don't be fooled.

I give the impression that I am secure,

that all is sunny and unruffled within me as well as without,

that confidence is my name and confidence is my game;

that the water is calm and I'm in command, and I need no one.

But don't believe me, please.

My surface may seem smooth, but my surface is my mask.

Beneath lies no complacency, beneath dwells the real me in confusion,

in fear, in aloneness, but I hide this, I don't want anyone to know it.

I panic at the thought of my own weakness and fear of being exposed.

That is why I frantically create a mask to hide behind..

a nonchalant sophisticated façade, to help me pretend,

and to shield me from the glance that knows.

But such a glance is precisely my salvation and I know it.

That is if it is followed by acceptance..if it followed by love.

It's the only thing that will assure me of what I cannot assure myself,

that I am worth something. But I don't tell you this. I don't dare. I'm afraid to.

I'm afraid your glance may not be followed by acceptance and love.

I'm afraid you might think less of me, that you'll laugh at me

and your laugh would kill me. I'm afraid that deep down I am nothing,

that I'm no good and that you will see this and reject me. So I play the game,

my desperate game, with a façade of assurance without and a trembling child within...and so begins my parade of masks..and my life becomes a front.

I idly chatter to you in the suave tones of surface talk. I tell you everything that is really nothing, but nothing of what is everything, of what is crying out within me.

So please, when I am going through my routine, do not be fooled by what I am saying Please listen carefully and try to learn what I am not saying, what I'd love to be able to say..what for survival I need to say, but what I can't say.

I dislike hiding..honestly. I dislike the superficial game I am playing, the phoney game. I'd love to be genuine and spontaneous, and me, but you've got to help me.

You've got to hold out your hand, even when that's the last thing I seem to want.

Only you can call me into life, into aliveness, each time you are kind gentle and encouraging. Each time you try to understand because you care, my heart begins to grow wings, very small, very feeble wings, but wings.

With your sensitivity sympathy and you power of understanding you can breath life into me. I want you to know that. I want you to know how important you are to me.

How you can be the creator of the person that is me if you choose to. Please choose to You alone can break down the walls behind which I tremble. You alone can remove my mask. You alone can release me from my world of panic and uncertainty. From my lonely person.

Do not pass me by. Please do not pass me by.

It will not be easy for you. A long conviction of worthlessness builds strong walls.

The nearer you approach me the blinder I strike back, and I fight against the very thing I cry out for. But I am told that love is stronger than walls and in this lies my hope.

Please try to break down those walls with firm but gentle hands, for a child is very sensitive.. Who am I you may wonder? I am someone you know very well..

[Charles C Finn Sept 1966]

..few years ago young practising Catholic wrote to her parish priest..she also copied in to it an Irish Catholic periodical who duly published her letter; in it she said..

“the Last Supper, the Eucharist, Jesus giving his life for us..this is as good as it gets”

“but there is something missing..not all of time but some of the time..” and she asked her priest “where is your passion?..where is the energy you gave your life for all those years ago?” and she turned it on herself and her fellow young disciples “where is our passion?..”

..perhaps she is hungry like prodigal son in Lukes gospel, not for food “he was surrounded by the husks the pigs were eating” he was and now she is hungry for relationship..for someone to notice him/her, to care enough to pick up a husk and offer it to him/her “take this all of you”

and now you in particular” and eat of it..this is my Body” “become what you receive, the Body of Christ”

..and pray as we gather to begin our exodus our camino journey to the Cross and on to the tomb, where is my passion?..you will notice as John’s gospel is read at Mass later this evening, “the Evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper” there is no graphic description of Our Lord’s last meal with his disciples..for John there is no Last Supper no Eucharist; instead it is the Washing of the Feet..

it wasn’t like the ones we have today
but it was the first century equivalent
and it is in this context
that we see Jesus
at the end of the evening
get up from that table
and spend time with each person here..
washing their feet
kissing their feet
anointing their feet..
here was an expression of love
so profound
that we cannot even imagine it..

if there is a holy moment in Jesus’ life
to which we can point and say,
“this is when he founded the church,
this is when he instituted the sacraments”
it was when he washed their feet..
we keep looking through the scriptures
looking for a time
when Jesus might have given
his followers some new authority
and we want to point to that
and call it the founding of the church..

but read carefully
it was when he washed their feet
that he founded his church..

this is the apostles real baptism
this is their healing
their reconciliation

their call to ministry.
this is, most importantly,
their eucharist.
this is for John and for us,
the moment when the body of Christ
is embraced,
shared,
broken.

the intimate love-making among them
replaces for John
any words of institution.
the line
“this is my body”
is to the body of Christ
in love and service

there is a question which haunts me
concerning the majority of the people
on this planet;
the ones who suffer hunger and thirst;
those imprisoned, killed and tortured;
those excluded, ridiculed, abused and mistreated;

who will wash their feet today?
who will be willing to pay that awful price?

[rethinking the Sacraments; Bill Heusch]

..for John then, writing 30yrs after the celebration of the Last Supper, and for you and I here tonight, it isn't a question of replacing the Eucharist with foot washing but realising..making real, making really present the real presence, the fullness of each/both..the Body of Christ in bread and wine, the Body of Christ in person of each of us..
this Mass, every Mass, only makes sense..divine sense rather than common sense, if it gracefully, passionately brings to life energy and action the love of Our Lord and service of Our Lord in our brothers and sisters in Christ..it is Mary and Martha..prayer at Our Lords feet and washing His feet..the Polish lady setting table for your breakfast tomorrow is praying for you as she places your knife fork spoon on dining table, an altar, a breakfast eucharist “in

guise of each and every neighbour “do this in memory of me” eat drink then serve..who will wash her feet tomorrow?..will it be you?..will it?

..the separation the dualism of old in our faith is reformed “semper reformanda” no longer sheep or goats..wheat or chaff..shepherd or innkeeper..practising or non-practising Catholic..polish immigrants and established UK citizens..
..it is both..in each we see the face and we wash feet of Christ..

No coincidence the first Maundy Thursday after his election 28 March 2013 he chose to break convention and he went to celebrate this Mass of the Lord’s Supper in a prison in Rome..Chiesa del Padre Nostra..Our Father’s Prison..”thank you for this great welcome..he gave his life for you and you and for me, for them, for everyone, first and last person, his love is present. His love never disappoints, because Jesus never tires of loving, he never gets tired of embracing us”

He kissed and washed feet of 12 prisoners, 6 men 6 women, including feet of a small baby in arms of his mother a prisoner..

He stressed importance of service and charity, of hope and dignity..

“I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you”

..imagine him flying into Poland earlier this week, asking to meet 12 refugees released from basement in Mariupol so cramped they had to sleep standing up tied to wooden rail on wall..40days..”I am told that love is stronger than walls, and in this lies my hope”..and he flies them back to Rome, and tonight at altar outside St Peter’s, he washes their feet..imagine..it couldn’t happen could it?..could it?

“where is your passion?..where is the energy you gave you life for all those years ago when you became a follower of Jesus..a companion of Jesus..

Few years ago now the Bar Convent Sisters in York..the IBVM the Mary Ward sisters changed their name..no longer IBVM now CJ “Companions of Jesus” a wonderful title for them in their ministries in servant discipleship and potentially in each of us here tonight..not a potential Companion of Jesus but a Companion of Jesus with potential
..infinite potential and passion..

Finish with story of my own from prison..2002 I spent year on a course in Dublin on Leadership and Formation..each Wed evg I visited Mountjoy Prison to see a prisoner called James..had to go through 15 prison doors to get to his cell each door manned by prison officer..last one would let me into cell and say he would come back for me at 9pm this was 730pm; James married with two teenage children a Catholic who hadn’t been near Church for years..prison 150yrs old no improvements..it failed UN Commission for Human Rights each year..cheaper to pay fine than build new prison..

inmates locked up some days for 23hrs..”give them something to eat yourselves” remember?
“for we are in a lonely place here”..a cell a pig sty..”but no one offered him anything”..three little gospel stories of him..his second morning in prison he received letter from his wife..opened it excitedly passionately scanned it for three key words he and we hope most to hear or to read..”I love you” instead he read four words

“I want a divorce” you are the weakest link..goodbye..

In his cell high up near ceiling was a tiny window..one night I was sitting on one chair he on side of his bed he asked to borrow my chair..put it on top of bed, climbed up on bed then up onto chair..reached up to take hold of bars on window and looked out..”do you know what I can see Fr Bede?” “what James?” “a bridge [outside prison] and I can see people walking across it..do you know Fr Bede one day I’m going to walk across that bridge”..a man with a dream..he may still be in prison hoping praying for his dream to come true..

One night I noticed on his bedside locker a paper plate with a piece of apple pie on it ..an offence in Ireland to have food in cell and if he was caught he would get his sentence lengthened by few weeks..halfway through visit he suddenly reached across for paper plate and handed it to me offering me piece of apple pie..my first reaction from head was to refuse it..it had probably been stolen from prison kitchen earlier in day..been through goodness knows how many pairs of dirty hands..coughed on and sneezed over..no doubt it would taste of all that was nasty about prison and its inmates

..stench mixture of urine tobacco smoke and drugs..I hesitated..and a phrase came to mind and heart “take it” he said “this is my body” James wanting me to have the only thing in all world he had freedom to own..and now to give away, as an expression of his love and appreciation..he the prisoner offering me the priest the Body of Christ, not under appearance of bread and wine, but in a stale ordinary well fingered piece of apple pie..the Body of Christ..one bread one body..James and me..

and who was weakest link in that cell? not James but me..not voted off or ridiculed but offered his love and friendship “..and he cured many who were in need of healing” I had gone as priest to take Christ to him and in him I met the real presence of Christ..so who do you bring to this three day camino.. a person or a situation in need of healing, a change in climate..a spiritual covid jab full of grace and truth..hungry for relationship and for restoration..

Please spare thought for James..your thought a prayer..he is still and always part of the Body of Christ..included to stand alongside those of you labelled the weakest or the guilty..a Mary Magdalen or a Judas..make his and their story your story..

..tell someone who is special in your life how much you love them..tell them often

..make sure you have a dream..and look forward to its coming true..

..take courage to give away your own last piece of apple pie..

and thank goodness for the weakest link among us this Triduum..their real presence makes all the difference..

..And the young disciples whose retreats I lead here in Alban Roe House will, if I share the story of James with them, will ask me the key question..

”Fr Bede, did you eat the piece of apple pie?”

..to “taste”..and tomorrow we experience “touch”..

[a fine book “Stations of the Cross” by Sara Maitland. She ponders on gospel accounts of the Passion Death and Resurrection of Our Lord, then she prays them to life, imagining, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, the wider story of what might have been..

I leave you to read short extract from the 4th Station Jesus meets his Mother.

In it Mary, Mother of Jesus, is invited to the Last Supper by the other disciples

[“did he say so?” I asked”..]

“there was a new anger in his preaching, but also a deep yearning sorrow. I began, with a kind of horror, to believe that he had gone too far and that they would try to kill him. I began to believe that he knew this too; and yet he was being so provocative, so outspoken, so..it felt to me..foolhardy, that I wanted to talk to him about it, to warn him perhaps; to know what he was feeling, what he was planning. I held my peace.

When he was twelve years old, he had made it painfully clear to me that what he did in Jerusalem had nothing to do with me. Yesterday morning, I woke from a dream about Elizabeth, and what I felt was envy..she had been dead and buried before the head of her son had been carried by that wanton girl round the hall of Herod’s palace. I knew I was not going to be so lucky.

But then I was a lovely day yesterday. The city felt vibrant..alive and exciting. Of course there were crowds and noise and the continual aggressive presence of the Roman soldiers; but it was feast time, and festival, and the sun was shining, and I thought perhaps I was being foolish, over-concerned. The only thing I really had to give him any more was my confident serenity. I was the one person who knew fully who and what he was, and I had to hold on to that for him.

Around midday, I met Simon Peter and Andrew coming up towards the Temple, looking cheerful and energetic. They were clearly pleased to see me; they had been coming to look for me, they said, because they now had a place for the Passover meal and they all wanted me to be with them. I was so pleased. “did he say so?” I asked.

It is so hard for a mother not to put herself first with her child. Not to feel that, because she has known him longest, she knows him best. We come to feel this way when they are small because, when they are small, it is true; but it is hard to give it up, to accept that an adult child has a whole life, has friends and people and work that you should not know about and never will; that are not your business and shouldn’t be; and that love means not making those demands, but giving a child its own freedom. I had to learn this and he taught me.

“who is my mother?” he said, out loud, in public. He did not even invite me in but, they say, stretched out his hand to his friends and told the crowd “here, look; these are my mother and my family.” It hurt. I learned.

So I asked “did he say so?”

They were clear that he had. He had asked Andrew to go down to the caravanserai that the Nazareth group were using and leave a message for me, that they had all been told to invite me if they met me.

It was a strange but lovely evening. The tension had not dissolved; there was a dark current of anxiety pulling at us all, but the ritual of the meal channelled in the way good ritual does. He

held the whole room..the meal, the old pieces of the Passover ceremonies and the new pieces that he gave us; he held them for us all with so much grace and intelligence and artistry..and somehow, during the evening, I was given a gift.

A question that has haunted me since before he was born was answered deep in my heart. Ever since the morning when the angel came and changed my life forever, I had wondered “why me?” and now I knew.”

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