

Maundy Thursday, April 17, 2014

Please be seated:

On this Maundy Thursday...Holy God, source and sovereign,
you put all power and authority into the hands of your beloved son Jesus Christ.....
The Christ, who washes our feet in humble service.
Teach us to love one another as you loved us,
so that everyone will know that we are your disciples;
through you, Jesus Christ our Lord, we pray.....Amen

From John's Gospel, Jesus said..... "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord--and you are right, for that is what I am.

So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them."

I would like to offer a question that cannot recall having heard in a church before. It is a question and response that I have read was offered by Reverend Charles Hoffacker, an Episcopal priest, writer and activist.

One of the great questions of life: Why is there anything at all, why is there a universe or maybe even universes..containing countless planets and suns?

To put this question in religious terms, why does God create things? Why should God bring about reality other than himself.... reality in the form of angels and stones, people and plants, galaxies, Higgs Boson particles, and atoms, animals and oceans? Why not leave well enough alone and simply have the blessedness of the Trinity, and avoid the messiness of creatures, with all their antics and complexities, especially human beings?

A starting point for an answer to this question is that we perceive the love of the Trinity as being larger than time itself. Hoffacker suggests that because of the overwhelming enormity of this love that the Trinity looks to share the gift of sheer being beyond itself.

The Trinity does not insist on having an exclusive on existence. No, far from it. It creates and sustains an unimaginable wealth of creatures.

God not only creates these beings, but sustains them in existence from one moment to the next in an exercise of profound and mysterious love.

From this very creation I believe God in fact humbles himself. He surrenders his exclusive hold on existence in order that we and all other creatures may exist. This willingness is an indication of divine humility.

The self-humbling of God continues in what we Christians call the Incarnation. The eternal Word of God, by whom all things are made and sustained, takes on human nature in the form of our Lord Jesus Christ,

The one by whom the heavens were crafted resides for nine months in a woman's womb and then is born on a particular day and in a particular place. This Jesus is subject to the limitations of human existence. He plunges deep into our condition, but I suggest that Jesus carries with him the natural total self-humbling attribute of God the Father.

When I was about eight years old, I had a pet tortoise named Peter. I loved that mysterious creature who spent the winter months buried deep in a pile of leaves in a wooden house that my dad had made for him.

Then every spring he would emerge from the house, Peter the tortoise that is...not my dad. Peter was looking for a big breakfast.

As an eight year old I was then physically capable of lying down in front of him...and feeding him lettuce leaves.....

As Peter ate the lettuce, I am sure he smiled at me through his wrinkled face. I remember a sense of feeling humbled being able to serve this living creature so different from me but for whom I had such a deep affection. As I muse on that encounter maybe I can even perceive a mutual humility in that encounter...between John and Peter the tortoise.....

Surely it is the same with God and humanity...God loved us so much he sent his only son into the world. God the Father humbled himself to come down into the valley of often troubled human existence.....He came here to save us from our sins through the impending sacrifice of His only son, Jesus Christ.

That brings us to tonight, the night before our Lord's ultimate sacrifice for us. Tonight a further humbling takes place, which is described in John's Gospel.

Jesus sets aside his role as teacher and lord and kneels before his astonished disciples to do the work of a slave, known in Jewish culture as a *doulos*. Into his open hands he takes their dirty feet and washes them clean again. By his own admission, Jesus does this to set an example for his disciples as to what they must do.

But there's more to his action than that. By his washing of feet in the upper room tonight, Jesus uncovers the significance of what will happen to him tomorrow on the cross.

Humility and total love travel like a golden thread of commitment from the Trinity through Jesus Christ the only son of God to us the total human community. Not one human being is excluded from this extraordinary gift that we are given this evening.

Hoffacker reminds us of the words of GK Chesterton the famous British writer..... Gilbert Keith Chesterton wrote "Christianity is the only religion on earth that has felt that omnipotence made God incomplete." A conventional all-powerful god may be what our desperate egos imagine.

But divine truth shatters this idol and presents us instead with the God whose power is manifest in humility. This God's omnipotence reaches its apex in an utter emptying of self, a free acceptance of an agonizing and painful execution.

Tomorrow's torture casts its shadow back onto tonight. Jesus accepts the cross; he decides to kneel before his disciples. By these actions he indicates the astounding depths of divine love.

At the end of their Agape dinner...sometimes termed a love feast... on the first Maundy Thursday... Jesus describes the impact of humility.

That humility creates equality.

"Do you know what I have done to you?

You call me Teacher and Lord--and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.".....Amen