

Wirksworth
5 April 2007
Maunder Thursday Eucharist

Do this in remembrance of me. No matter what we think happens to bread and wine at the prayer of consecration, these words take us back to Jerusalem two thousand years ago. But these words work the other way, too: they bring Jerusalem of two thousand years ago here today, to this place, in this place. And not just the words, but all the action and the whole occasion: the upper room, the meal, Jesus and the disciples knowing that something nasty was going to happen, and the togetherness of the disciples, even the one who had something to hide.

'Do this in remembrance of me' brings it all into the present. That is what sacraments do. And they bring with them all the intervening years as well: all the Christians of the past, all the joys and sadnesses of history. The whole of the past concentrated into the words and action of the consecration prayer: we open the door of Dr Who's Tardis and find ourselves in the vastness of history. This notion of space-time is a bit at odds with western European linear time, but it is inherent in folk-memory, in community-memory, and is very much a living part of middle-Eastern culture, even today. It is Hebrew zikkaron, and, fascinatingly, has something in common with notions of space-time known to the particle physicist.

Every time the Lord's supper is celebrated, the past is gathered up and presented to us. And then in the heavenly banquet, past and present are refreshed and ejected, launched into the world transformed. In an instant, the caterpillar of the past becomes the butterfly of the future. Rebirth. Or, if you prefer astronomy, the entire universe is compressed, sucked into the infinitely dense black hole of crucifixion, the bloody, dirty hole of the crucifixion, and propelled with infinite acceleration, dispersed to create the glorious new universe.

This is a magnificent vision. All Christian theology and history concentrated into the moment at every Eucharist. No wonder we should celebrate it with all possible splendour and theatre and solemnity and joy. The entire cosmos gathered up and borne for an instant by the priest. You can imagine what a great burden is placed on the priest at that brief moment in the holy mystery.

Renewal is a major theme of foot washing too. Imagine Jesus and the disciples' feet. No stout brogues. I doubt that they would have been so lacking in fashion sense as to wear socks with their sandals. Who knows what they trod in. So in washing their feet, Jesus was taking a bit of a risk. Not something that in our ridiculously clean, 'nice' world, many would relish today. This is a cleansing, like Baptism. A washing away of the dust on our feet, the past. It's a confession. And as we wash each other's feet we might confess our weaknesses to one another. In my sermon here on the Sunday before Lent, I suggested that we should use Lent to try to see ourselves as others see us, and give up the things that shock us about that vision of ourselves. As we wash each other's feet, then, we might tell each other of these things, and ask for help in giving up our addictions. In truth, we should be washing each other's feet as a preparation for HC at every Eucharist.

Foot washing was something that Jesus did for his disciples. It is an act of service. It expresses God's will and purpose, and gives us a model to emulate. It brings the past with it, and it shows us how it can be transformed by service to others. It too is a sacrament that gathers up the past for service to the future.

Each of us is a sacrament, too. Each of us has all our past within us. We are the sum of our memories. All our past is included in our genes – genes from the primeval soup at the moment of creation are in every one of our cells. And, sisters and brothers, all this past is sanctified tonight in these sacraments. We are cleansed. We are fed. We are, and heaven knows I need this, forgiven. We have the meal set out by the gracious father for the prodigal son.

We are accepted, and empowered. And we too are launched for future service. That is why we celebrate the institution of the Holy Eucharist, and wash each other's feet.

It is a thing most wonderful. Nothing in my hand I bring, but rather, just as I am.