

Maundy Thursday 2008

Has it ever struck you with how at home the Jews and early Christians are with parts of the body, and bodily functions. They think nothing of talking at length about wombs, circumcision, hearts, body, blood, eyes, ears. They are much less prissy than us. They are much more basic and down to earth than respectable Anglicans pretend to be.

Today we hear a lot about body and blood, and I'm going to say a few words about blood and body – specifically feet.

First blood.

The film *Gandhi* again, when early in the film, Gandhi and Charlie Andrews on a crowded train, and Andrews invited up to the roof. An Indian says to him 'I have friends who are Christian: they eat flesh and drink blood every Sunday.' It's meant to be a friendly greeting! In today's culture of flesh-eating zombie films and vampire films and video games, Christianity has a hard time getting through to the unchurched used only to these ghoulish images of flesh and blood. And I have a confession to make: I would be ashamed to tell you how very recently it was that the penny dropped about the real significance of blood in Christian theology, and the reason for this is that I looked on blood from a medical point of view, whereas the key to the issue is in the layman's point of view.

Picture someone attacked in the street, lying bleeding in the gutter. As the blood seeps away, so does the life-force. Lack of blood equals death, so *blood equals life*. For Jews and Muslims, ritual preparation of meat to eat involves draining all the blood so that they are not guilty of consuming the God-given 'life force'. The blood that marks the doorposts in the first Passover (Exodus) signifies that the house will be preserved: *blood equals life*. And so the blood of Jesus, the blood that flows from his crucified side gives life to the world. All the references to blood of Jesus in Holy Scripture and in many rather gruesome hymns refer to the giving of life. The sacrifice on the cross is life giving for exactly this reason.

There are parallels between the blood that circulates in our blood vessels and the blood of Jesus.

- Blood brings nutrient to the cells of the body. What more nutritious than the Sermon on the Mount, the two great commandments, the parables?
- Blood contains red cells that bring oxygen to the tissues. Jesus brings us the oxygen of his life. Get rid of the smoke of duty and shoulds, and instead take up the clear air of freedom from worldly burdens. We are in the world, but not of the world. This is yet another parallel with Buddhist teaching, and Hindu.
- Blood contains white cells that fight disease and maintain health. Isn't that exactly what the teachings and example of Jesus can do for us?
- Blood removes rubbish from the tissues of the body, and contains platelets that plug holes in the blood vessels. The resources of the church are there for us when we feel burdened, and life overcomes us. *Come unto me all that labour and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you.*

So now when I hear of the 'blood of the lamb', I understand it as, quite simply, the will to do the divine will, that is, obedience to the divine. As St John's Gospel has it: 'Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you shall not have life within you' (John 6:53). And in the passion gospel we hear that when Christ's body was pierced, blood and water flows out to sanctify the whole earth.

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Now feet. For most of the people on the planet feet are even more important than they are for us. Feet in bad condition means no work. Feet need to be cared for. Washing feet an example of great service and kindness. And naked feet of the very rich look just like naked feet of the very poor.

The symbolism here is obvious.

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 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. Washing the feet of others is a model for my ministry. Last week I was on silent retreat for two days. I discussed with my confessor the things that pulled me apart in this job. Especially the tensions of having to be a confidant, pastor, teacher, business manager,

administrator, fundraiser, rural parson, suburban priest, Bearing in mind all the upheavals of the last year with ADDO and LG etc, I think I've done pretty well to come through it this far this well. But when I am trying to balance all those aspects of my ministry, I need to remember Our Lord's example of washing feet. Pedicure. It might mean cleaning the feet first, getting rid of disease, but always, always, it means keeping your feet and mine on the ground.

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Dealing with real human issues again gets me back to the body.

St Isaac: Union with God is a mystery that is worked out in human persons. The personal character of a human being who has entered on the way of union is never impaired, even though he renounces his own will and his natural inclinations. This is how the human personality comes to its full realization in grace.

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Christmas 1620

In the old Ritual of the Church we find that on the cover of the canister, wherein was the Sacrament of His Body, there was a star engraven, to shew us that now the star leads us thither, to His body there.

And what shall I say now, but according as St. John saith, and the star, and the wise men say, 'Come.' And He, Whose the star is, and to Whom the wise men came, saith, 'Come.' And let them who are disposed, 'Come.' And let whosoever will, take of the 'Bread of Life, which came down from Heaven' this day into Bethlehem, the house of bread. Of which Bread the Church is this day the house, the true Bethlehem, and all the Bethlehem we have now left to come to for the Bread of life, - of that His life which we hope for in Heaven. And this our nearest coming that here we can come, till we shall by another *venite* come, unto Him in His Heavenly Kingdom to which He grant we may come, That this day came to us in earth that we thereby might come to Him and remain with Him for ever, 'Jesus Christ the Righteous.'

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, the incarnation of love, whose suffering, death and resurrection transforms us, and whose righteousness dawns upon the world scattering the darkness of sin, death and injustice, grant us grace and glory.

Amen.