

Holy Thursday

Jesus said, “No-one has greater love than the one who lays down his life for his friends.” I believe this with all my heart, but I wonder whether I’ve ever done it. Somehow, as long as I go on living, I am unsure that I have given myself in any real way. My generosity always has its little pay-offs: the pleasure of giving, the hidden strings I attach to my gifts, the kudos I exact from others when I’ve been generous, and so on.

None of these pay-offs can be significant if your self-gift results in your death. Jesus actually loses his life for us; therefore, *no greater love*.

Might we suspect that Jesus *despises* the life he loses, in favour of the eternal life from which he can never be separated? Certainly not. He contemplates the loss of his life with all the revulsion and horror we know. The Letter to the Hebrews tells us:

He was put to the test in every way that we are, though he did not sin.

This testing reaches its zenith in the Passion. The Agony in the Garden is no pretence. Nor should we think that his divine life somehow came to his rescue, so that he could contemplate his death with a kind of superb equanimity. It isn’t a cheap gift that we are offered tonight, and we could never have gathered the Christian Church around it for twenty centuries if it had been.

I am always struck by the fact that the washing of the disciples’ feet is the last free act, the last sign that Jesus was able to give. This suggests that its meaning is deeply connected to the Passion itself: when he tells Peter, *you will understand later*, he means *after my death*. Really we should consider, not that the Passion provides a key for understand the washing of feet, but that the washing of feet provides an indispensable clue for understanding the Passion, for understanding Jesus whose Passion it is. When he is bound and hustled away, and condemned and sentenced, people will look on him, and think he is being taken where he did not want to go; others take him, and he is simply passive. To forestall this misunderstanding, while he is still free, Jesus makes himself into one who is lower than a slave, so that when we look on the crucifixion, we shall be sure that he goes to the cross by his own free choice.

So his words are fulfilled:

I lay down my life.

No-one takes it from me; I lay it down of my own accord.

And as it is in my power to lay it down, so it is in my power to take it up again.

Our part tonight is to be receivers of this gift: not just the finite gift of a fellow-human’s life, but the awesome, the eternal, the infinite gift of the Father, who gives us his beloved Son to be our Saviour.