

St Mary-le-Bow, Cheapside, London EC2V 6AU

Sung Eucharist of the Lord's Supper with foot washing and stripping of the altar

The Revd George Bush, Rector

Maundy Thursday 18th April 2019 at 1.05pm

A friend, being interviewed by HMRC for a job in complaints was asked how he would respond if faced by crying on the telephone; the right answer it seemed was, 'It depends on how bad the crying is'. One can only wonder how you detect tears on the 'phone.

There is a lot of water in this liturgy; water to wash feet, to mix with the wine, to wash the priest's hands. Philip Larkin wrote

If I were called in
To construct a religion
I should make use of water...
A furious devout drench

A little while ago someone was here for solace following the sudden and distressing death of a friend of fifteen years. He stayed to hear her named in the Eucharist and at the Peace when I greeted him, my hands were made damp, washed as it were with his tears. I recall a friend experiencing distress about the world, himself and the church and finding that his tears were real and substantial, almost a comfort because they were evidence that his distress was actual, not imagined. Crocodiles do have tears but they aren't linked to emotion.

On one occasion Jesus was greeted by a woman, probably a former prostitute -who in her gratitude to and perception of Jesus – let down her hair (unthinkably indiscreet) and used it to brush away the tears that had flowed from her onto his feet, even before she could anoint them with oil. Jesus' host is so shocked by Jesus' silent receiving of this courtesy that his own absence of gratitude and his lack of hospitality is exposed.

Seemingly tears are composed of water, salts, antibodies and enzymes although the tears associated with strong emotions have more protein-based hormones, including one with pain killing properties. Tears as anaesthetic.

A nurse is reported to have apologised to a ward sister for crying about the condition of a patient, to which the sister replied, 'If you can't cry I don't want you on my ward'.

We know that Jesus wept – in grief at the death of his friend Lazarus, in sorrow for the city of Jerusalem and its fate, and in fear as he contemplated his own fate – all of which recommend to us the fullness of his humanity.

Tears course down the face –we began Lent with our faces and a cross-shaped smudge on the forehead; both as a token of sorrow for sin and a reminder of our mortality. Our faces give us away; they reveal the ravages of time, the rawest emotions and the merest recognition or hesitation. The criminal hides his face from the CCTV because his shoulders or her knees will never be enough to convict. And it is the lifting of the bride's veil rather than the gait down the aisle which confirms love and honour. Many people in later years

attest to how they are happily familiar with the face in the mirror for daily shaving and hair brushing but are appalled by a photograph taken at an unguarded moment. You don't get the over 60s taking selfies. Aging is not humiliation but it ought to remind us that we are not yet what God would have us be.

I can't really get down to study my feet these days, though I hazard they are always pretty clean. But I need them so much to get around. I can't promise I do the regulation 10,000 steps a day – but then the benefit to my heart leads to wear and tear on my heels and toes. But no one is going to nail them in place and stop me moving in the next day or so. My feet seem less essential than my face and yet they are not so – they are the guarantee of my mobility, my freedom and my ability to go where I want and sometimes where God does.

And my hands too – they won't be nailed either by tomorrow teatime; but they can wash. Washing feet is exceptional I'll grant and it isn't so much my privilege (though it is) as my duty. If we ended up with priests who couldn't wash feet we should be in a sorry place – but it isn't intended to stop there; this should be contagious, an epidemic of humility and of offering. Feet and hands, feet and hands – with tears perhaps – and all for each other. Accompanying one another on our journey and tending each other when sore.

Tears, feet, hands, water, bread and wine. Not ideas only but real substantial things which can change how things are; they prove the value of the ideas we espouse, they guarantee the doctrines we believe.

Dennis Potter, the playwright was asked in some interviews conducted in his terminal illness whether he had found in religion anything to assist him in his plight. He responded that he didn't know if religion was the bandage or the wound. Christians would unhesitatingly say that it was both for we discover today, tomorrow and the next day that it is by his wounds that we are healed.