

Maundy Thursday & Kenosis

(a theology of service)

Coomera Anglican College

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(The easiest reference for this short reflection is the final chapter of *Sabbath and the Common Good* by George V Browning, Echo Books. Called "The Human vocation: living within limits", it beautifully unpacks kenosis as being, the heart of the human vocation.)

John 13

Today's reading issues the mandate, the command to love. Notice the Teacher at work, the modelling, the invitation to copy, the call to love.

Jesus the Teacher washes feet and asks those watching to copy.

Foot washing is not a simple curriculum item to implement. It is not a task Jesus acts out but an expression of who he truly is.¹

Call it kenosis: the One who empties himself to be with us, asks us to engage the world in the same manner, not by isolated acts but as a way of being. Copying means solidarity with the One who is one in solidarity with the vulnerable, the outcast, the victim. The innate dignity of the other is first honoured in Christ who is emptied of all pretence and ruling over to be with, even, or rather ultimately, as victim.

This 'emptying' is not a new way of God's being. This agency in redemption is the same in Creation; the Word that creates is the same that is Incarnate. Balthasar puts it thus: *the kenotic character of God in redemption reflects the same character of God in creation and vice versa.*²

Service is not about anxiety or the impassioned fixing of what is broken. It is a movement that is consonant with the Word who creates and redeems.

In our culture it is hard to imagine time as anything other than a linear movement from start to end. But in the Alpha and Omega, God who is before beginning and after end, past present future is held together in one living 'seeing'. Self emptying is who Christ is before the foundation, a part of the always-was and will-be. As we copy the teacher, it can be described thus

give over self to the other;
freely donate one's full, open, gracious attention
surrender to full engagement and embrace of the lived moment

Call it love. This is the great reality behind the universe. It is how the universe works.

¹ Maybe the best example of a context for this ritual act is a wedding ceremony between the celebrants – the bride and groom. A foot washing here is not a lovely thing done, like the lighting of a wedding candle. It is a window into a way of being; it declares 'with all that I am and have, I will honour you'. It is a ritualised icon of being in covenant together, a testament to a present and continuous state of 'I will'.

² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 11

Service thus contrived is not altruism or 'doing good', it is alignment to reality; it is coherence to the way things are; it is "conformity with the governing principles of the universe;"³ it is harmony to the creative, redemptive vibration at the heart of the universe; it is faithfulness to the living Word; it is living into the human vocation.

This is beyond religious language and enters a truly catholic vocabulary: the command to love is less a directive and more a declaration – this is the way things are, so align yourself to how things are (and who God is).

The foot washing is not another example of lame Christian niceness of symbolic gesturing that makes no real difference. It is the Teacher calling us into authentic engagement with the world, an identification with the lost, least, little, the outcast, the condemned, the accused, the victim. "As I have loved, you should love".

So relax. Don't be anxious. Don't conceive yourselves as martyr, saviour, change agent. Identify yourself with the One who is already present in the world as creator and redeemer. Make haste and slowly go about this work of being real in the world that God already loves and is fully present to.

³ George F.R. Ellis, 'Kenosis as a Unifying Theme for Life and Cosmology', in *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, ed. John Polkinghorne (Longdon: SPCK, 2001), 107-126