

THE TENDERNESS OF JESUS

Exodus 12. 1-4, 11-14

1 Corinthians 11. 23-26

John 13. 1-17, 31b-35

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Let's be honest: feet are tender. They endure a lot of abuse down there, shoe-horned into footwear, holding us up through the day, ignored, taken for granted, yet capable of much weariness. Feet are tender, and it is tender of our Lord to care for them. In the arid climate of his time, where sandals were ordinary footwear and walking was the normal means of transportation, a gracious host would give you a bowl of water so that, upon your arrival, you could bathe your feet. You would bathe your own feet. To wash someone else's feet was more than could be required, even of a slave (or at least of a Hebrew slave). Even the lowliest servant would not be asked to wash your feet; the servant might be lowly, but he was never that low.

Jesus put himself that low. Having come down from heaven to be one of us, on the night before he submitted himself to death, he took towel and basin and, without prior explanation, silently washed his disciples' feet. That was humble service exceeding all humility. That was Christ coming all the way down; that was Christ being tender.

Our Lord's character was always to be tender, although as we know that did not keep him from being firm or truthful, or from opposing cruelty. The two character traits - opposing cruelty and being tender - often went together in Jesus. St Matthew, after telling us of an act of mercy that Christ performed on the Sabbath in the face of opposition, quotes a verse from Isaiah (42. 3), a prophecy that he saw our Lord fulfilling: 'He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smouldering wick' (Mt 12. 20).

If a reed is bruised, a careless person might just break it off; and if the wick is smoking or smouldering rather than burning, a thoughtless person might just extinguish it. But Jesus is always tender. He doesn't make things worse for people who are 'bruised reeds'.

In fact, the way for Christ's coming into the world was prepared by tenderness. When John the Baptist was born about six months before our Lord's birth, his father Zechariah prophesied that John would go before Jesus to prepare his way. The coming of Jesus, heralded by John, is described as 'the dawn from on high (that) will break upon us' - how? - 'by the tender mercy of our God' (Lk 1.76-79). God himself is tender to us, and the very sending of Christ was a tender mercy of the Father, coming down upon us from on high, to bring us light and truth in the midst of darkness.

When he washes his disciples' feet, our Lord goes all the way down. It is a place of humiliation, of humility in the extreme. Why does he go there? Because he would not break a bruised reed; because he has compassion on us.

The tender compassion of Jesus is recounted throughout St Matthew's gospel. Remember this verse from Matthew 9: 'When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd' (9. 36). And this: 'When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick' (14. 14). Another time, when he had been performing miracles for three days, he said to his disciples, 'I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat; and I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint on the way' (15. 32).

Compassion features in Christ's teaching. A parable makes the point: a servant, who owed his king ten thousand talents, begged his Lord to have patience with him, and

our Lord says, ‘out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt’. But the servant turned around and would not forgive another man a tiny debt; he did not show compassion, and when the lord learned of that, he ‘handed him over to be tortured until he should repay his entire debt’ (Mt 18. 23-35).

Compassion runs through everything with Jesus. Two blind men asked him for mercy, to open their eyes; and St Matthew writes, ‘Moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes. Immediately they regained their sight and followed him’ (Mt 20. 34). A leper came and knelt before him, asking him if he chose to make him clean. ‘Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, “I do choose. Be made clean!”’ (Mk 1. 41-42). And Christ explained the healings he performed as signs of God’s own compassion. The so-called Gerasenes demoniac, out of whom Jesus drove a legion of devils (who then entered into a herd of swine, which then leapt into the sea and were drowned), was told to go tell his friends ‘how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you’ (Mk 5. 19).

The most moving stories, I think, are in St Luke’s gospel. There was a dead man, ‘who was his mother’s only son’, being carried out to his grave; and our Lord, seeing the mother, ‘had compassion for her’, and told her not to weep. He then went to the bier, and said ‘Young man, I say to you, rise!’ (Lk 7. 14). And Christ told about a man on the road down to Jericho, who was beaten by robbers and left for dead, and a Samaritan came by and had pity on him (Lk 10. 33). Our Lord also told about a son who took his inheritance early and went off and squandered his living, and then, with nowhere else in the world to go, returned home; and his father, who saw him when he was yet a great way off, had compassion on him ‘and ran, and put his arms around him and kissed him’ (Lk 15. 20).

This is Jesus. He came down from heaven by God's tender mercy. He showed tenderness by compassion throughout his life. He taught his disciples to be merciful, compassionate and tender themselves.

And now, tonight, at the end, he is at their feet, washing them.

To get down there, down to the feet, St John says (in one translation) Christ 'laid aside' (RSV) his outer garments. He laid aside his garments. These garments symbolise his life. When our Lord spoke of himself as the Good Shepherd, he said, 'I lay down my life, in order to take it up again. . . . I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again' (10. 17-18). When Jesus lays down his garments and washes his disciples' feet, that is a symbol of his dying for their sake. And when he rises and puts back on his outer garments, that is a prefiguring of his resurrection.

But here, tonight, we see the death and the resurrection with infinite tenderness. When we think about the pain of the cross, the agony, the brutality of the nails, the asphyxiation and the shame, Christ wants us to see it as the culmination of a life of unspeakable tenderness. Our Lord's life on earth originated in the Father's tender mercy. The Father desired that his Son be with us and that he show us how to live tenderly ourselves. Do not forget this tenderness. This is the deepest truth of reality, and it is the all-surrounding truth of the cosmos. Jesus has gone all the way down. He has washed our feet. He has died for us and risen again. And the one word that describes it all is tenderness.

Amen.