IF I DO NOT WASH YOU
Monday in Holy Week
21st March 2016
Anglican Centre in Rome
50th Anniversary of Meeting of Archbishop Michael Ramsey and Pope Paul VI
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'If I do not wash you, you have no part in me.'

The eighth verse of today's gospel; with Jesus addressing Peter. (John. 13. 8)

These coming days are momentous days both as we annually rehearse the mystery of our Lord's passion, but also as we remember the events of fifty years ago in this, the Eternal City. Let me set the scene. Michael Ramsey, then Archbishop of Canterbury was there at the Vatican; it was a sort of pre-rite almost leading into his meetings with the Holy Father. Wearing the enculpion given him by Alexei I, Patriarch of Moscow and all the Russias, he was robed in convocation robes and topped out with his purple velvet Canterbury Cap. He cut an imposing if slightly eccentric pose, causing Cardinal Cicognani who was looking after him to say:

'What a sight! This place hasn't seen a sight like it since Archbishop Arundel came'

Arundel had come, of course, in 1397. That had been the most recent formal or 'official' visit of an Archbishop of Canterbury to a Pope. Official the visit may have been, but Arundel came as a fugitive from King Richard II of England. Ramsey was no fugitive, but instead an Anglican ambassador of Christ to the Holy Father.

It is curiously appropriate that we should celebrate these events today, as we bring forward the renewal of vows from Maundy Thursday to this Mass. For at the heart of those vows, for all who are ordained into God's church, is a pattern of self-giving rooted in the sacrifice of Our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. That patterning power of the Kingdom, inextricably bound to the events of this most solemn of all commemorations, rests on a pattern of giving which takes us to the heart of God; that *kenosis*, that
self-emptying, is captured in those words of Jesus to Peter in our gospel today:

'If I do not wash you, you have no part in me.'

The offering to which we are called is most radical, and it stands pivotal to this whole week and most notably to the events of Maundy Thursday. The night of the betrayal of Jesus is the hinge point. The gospels use for the betrayal the Greek word *paradidomai*; it means simply 'handing over' and it is the same word which is translated into English as tradition - 'that which is handed over.'

A generation ago now, William Vanstone, one of the most brilliant Anglican priests of his time, wrote two books, which have since become classics. The second book, titled *The Stature of Waiting*, focuses on this moment of handing over. It is the moment, he notes, when Jesus ceases *to do*, and 'hands himself over' *to be done to.* Vanstone recounts a telling vignette of a surgeon who operates on a young man. This young man is someone of outstanding promise but stricken by a neurological incapacity which can only be reversed by the most sensitive and intricate of operations. The most respected specialist surgeon in this sphere agrees to take the risk. The operation lasts some hours. It is successful, but, by the end of it, the surgeon is so exhausted, that he has to be led out of the theatre, by hand, in the care of one of the nurses. Everything the surgeon has to give is expended – all is 'handed over.' Echoes of Christ's self-giving are caught up in this most human story.

But why should all this so resonate with this year's golden celebrations of this place which and honours arguably one of the key ecumenical advances of the mid-twentieth century. Well, the answer is, of course, first because it required risk and courage from both the Archbishop and Holy Father. It meant a radical self-giving, a living of the gospel. They were treading new ground.

The shift of paradigm here in Rome which made it possible was presaged by *Unitatis Redintegnatio*, Vatican II's Decree on Ecumenism. But this paradigm change went far deeper than just ecclesiastical documents. On a far more local and personal level it was felt in this place. In March 1965, Pope Paul asked John Findlow, effectively the first Director of this Centre, to come for a private audience. They talked of a number of things, including the validity of Anglican orders. In the course of their discussion, the Pope reflected:

'[These] questions can now be put in a new light. . . The winter in which everything is cold, and which itself is often destructive, has now ended and we are at the beginning of spring and waiting for everything to burst into leaf and blossom.'

This moving and powerful response was typical of the sensitive and intelligent holiness of Giovanni Battista Montini, that is Paul VI. The impact of the meeting which we celebrate cannot be underestimated. It opened the gates to the Malta Report and the ARCIC process of which the present Director of this Centre is the present Anglican co-chair. That dialogue has been pioneering and almost a template for so much else that has followed multi-laterally and bi-laterally within God's Church. Of course, the encounter also gave birth to this place. Cardinal Jan Willebrands, then President of what is now the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity commented:

'I think that this Centre, which is the immediate fruit of the visit of his Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury, will contribute by research, by studies, by conversation – to the dialogue which will be developed in the immediate future. It will contribute by personal contact, thought and prayer.'

Pope Paul said of this place that it would lead to a knowledge which banishes mistrust. He coined a phrase, as he himself put it:

'Knowledge prepares the way for love: love leads to unity.'

All that has come to pass and lives with us still. Indeed added to that in the past two years has been a commitment to social justice and care for those enslaved in our contemporary world, and those in the developing world dying for lack of food and medical care.

So, as we all prepare to renew our vows at the very heart of which is the pattern of Christ's own suffering, let us remember especially the conclusion of that encounter of Pope and Archbishop. The Holy Father, the night before his final meeting with Michael Ramsey, sent his Secretary round to Father John Andrew, a late and great friend to many of us here. John was then Chaplain to Ramsey. The Secretary revealed that the Pope wished to give his episcopal ring to the Archbishop. Should he be warned, or should it be a surprise? Only a moment's pause was needed before the response came in unison from them both: 'It must be a surprise!

Surprise indeed it was, and the ring resonated in a way with a different sort of vow, that of marriage. The vow to work towards that marriage convicts us all still. That also, just like our own discipleship and ministry, requires sacrifice and self-giving. Michael Ramsey, reflecting soon after all these events, on the Pope's gift of his ring, said simply:

> 'I felt vividly, that he was giving me a piece of himself.'

And so we end where we began

> . . . 'If I do not wash you, you have no part in me.'

Amen

<u>Readings</u>
Exodus. 12. 1-4, 11-14.
I. Cor. 11. 23-26.
John. 13. 1-17, 31b-35.