

MAUNDY THURSDAY EVENING ADDRESS

As a young priest in Chester Diocese, I used to look up at the Canon's Residentiary of the Cathedral with awe and wonder. One of the Canons was awkward, liturgically in a place where Cranmer would have been modern, and a lover of copious quantities of sherry.

But Bill Vanstone also had one of the most profound theological minds of his time, and as part of this Lent, I have read again his 'Stature of Waiting' a modern classic which has that timeless air of relevance and quality... which probably means the Canon Precentor of Leicester Cathedral should read it every Lent that comes!

The central pillar of the work is the fact that Jesus is 'handed over' to the soldiers in Gethsemane... Gethsemane, for Vanstone, the very climax of Christ's ministry, Gethsemane from which we will symbolically flee tonight. Jesus submits himself utterly and unreservedly to the will of others and waits for the consequences to unravel. He hands (himself) over for us, in Greek *paradidomi*, this handing over of himself which is the vital forerunner of 'He dies for us'. *Paradidomi* is often mistranslated as 'betrays' which mistakenly makes more significant what Judas does **to**

Jesus, rather than what Jesus **does himself** and for the world. There is a real sense of Jesus handing **himself** over in the Johannine text, rather than a betrayal by others, namely Judas, or of others handing him over to the 'powers that be.'

Now before a short address gets converted in a technical bible study, let me 'cut to the chase' and ask... what does this mean to those who follow the way to the Cross with Christ. It means I think that Jesus in handing himself over to be unreservedly done to certainly asks of me at least how vulnerable I am willing to be in my Christian pilgrimage? How willing am I to be handed over to the will of others, and to be done to for good or ill?

If I want to plant my feet firmly in the footprints of Jesus, what does that say about my willingness to be vulnerable, to be passive, to be open to the sometimes not too kindly 'ways of the world'.

How willing am I to be done to as was Jesus, with no control of path to be trod, with harsh words to be assimilated, perjuries to be countenanced, sufferings to be endured, misrepresentations to be swallowed, failures to be assumed, and retorts not to be spoken.

In the Passion, it is in 'the passive' that Christ saves the world. At that one moment of handing over in Gethsemane, all the action of former ministry is laid aside, and he becomes as stripped in every other way as he was physically by the soldiers prior to the utter humiliation of crucifixion.

There are shadows of this handing over throughout Jesus' ministry not least in the metronomic occurrences of the Markan Passion Predictions, foreshadowing Gethsemane often actually in the Greek passive tense...and of course, there are more subtle similarities in the Johannine text. The theme is never far away, but it is not until Gethsemane that we see this passivity becoming complete, this 'being done to' totally focussed, and therefore the salvation of the world finding its victory in the sacrifice of the Lamb of God.

There have been many times in my life and ministry where I have needed to be 'at the helm'...presently, for example, steering the 'liturgical liner', being in charge of certain things that are, and being at the sharp end of decisions which have to be made.

In some sense, that is the easy part.

It is how we align ourselves with the vulnerability of Christ which is for many by far the harder thing to allow... and for me, by far, the harder person to be.

How do we feel about ourselves being handed over to the will of the other? How do we feel about being passive to what others may say of us, do to us, and think about us amidst our lives and ministries?

How do we feel about ourselves giving over the steering wheel to others, allowing therefore ourselves not to be in control, and to risk vulnerability and its possible failure...a dereliction which indeed Christ himself expressed from the cross.

As Vanstone says... 'It is in the lover's voluntary vulnerability that 'the Son of Man is glorified'.

So often the expectations of humanity loom up like some awful spectre in front of us... we cannot appear 'weak', so we don't apologise... we cannot appear 'mistaken', so we don't 'own up'... we cannot appear 'vulnerable', so we don't admit our deepest hurts...the list could go on.

The Gethsemane example of Christ reveals that it is exactly in this openness, vulnerability and powerlessness where the power of love is at its strongest. As Vanstone says 'God in Jesus becomes subject to the

'whims' of his creation because God is love.' I would love him not to have used the word 'whim' but of course he is spot on!

The handing over of Gethsemane from this very night is to be worked through the bent trial, the silence of false interrogation, scourging, and procession finally to a place where, even if contemplated, the Saviour of the World could not move a muscle in action and his passivity was complete on a Cross.

The greatest paradox of this passivity is that through being totally 'done to' Jesus Christ was able to save the world.

And here the last truth... is it not in our 'being done to' that so often we find the greatest meaning of faith and an extraordinary insight into who we really are. Isn't it in our 'being done to' that we are subject to the truth of love in all its fullness, and where such love is given with no thought of pay-back.

As Christ hangs on a cross, 'love' with arms outstretched shines to eternity, though a love received today by you and by me.