

Sermon for Thursday 14th April 2022, Year C, Maundy Thursday

Preached at All Saints, Biddenden

Exodus 12:1-14; I Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17

And so, here in John's Gospel, we arrive at the beginning of the end. Jesus knows that his hour has come to depart from the world and return to the Father. And so, he carefully plans what he will say and do in the company of his friends and disciples during this final time together.

I've seen it reported that prisoners waiting on death row in the United States will often labour for many days over the exact words that they will share with their loved ones, so that every word is full of meaning and significance, love, consolation... even hope and expectation.

Likewise, Jesus begins and ends his farewell by referring to love. This is the beginning, end and culmination of everything that he has taught, and everything that he is.

Now, if we didn't already know the story, we might be expecting Jesus the Son of God to return to his Father in a literal blaze of glory, much like the prophet Elijah, who was taken up to heaven in a fiery chariot. Elisha, his disciple, was able to ask for and receive a double portion of Elijah's spirit as a parting gift. So, what a shock it must have been for the disciples when Jesus presents them not with a mantle of authority that can part the waters like Elijah's cloak, but a towel of humble service.

Jesus rises from the meal, takes off his outer robe, wraps a towel around himself, and proceeds to wash the disciples' dirty feet. May I remind you – this is the Lord of the Universe!

According to the Mechilta, one of the earliest works of Jewish scripture commentary, not even a Hebrew slave was expected to perform such menial service. While foot-washing is often referred to as an ancient act of hospitality,

the usual process was the bringing of water so that guests could wash themselves. For example, while visiting the home of Simon the Pharisee, Jesus complains to him, saying: “I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet”.

We will probably not be surprised to learn that the only exceptions to this were acts by women, most notably in the very same scene in Simon’s house, where an unnamed woman washes Jesus’ feet with her tears and anoints them with ointment, causing Jesus to sharply contrast Simon’s lack of charity with the woman’s great love.

So we see that the mantle of Jesus’ authority is the towel: a tool of women’s work – practical, unglamorous loving service.

This is the symbolic origin of the stole that priests wear around our necks. It is both a form of towel and a yoke that one might place on the neck of a beast of burden. This is also why, despite the traditional colour of Passiontide being red to reflect the blood of Christ, on Maundy Thursday the colour of our stoles is white – because of Jesus’ towel.

And so, using his towel, Jesus begins his lesson in loving service. He comes to Simon Peter, who refuses to allow Jesus to wash him. You can imagine his horror. It would be like the Queen stooping down to wash our feet! Our culture today still struggles with this. When churches try to incorporate foot-washing into a Maundy service, few people will willingly allow the priest to kneel before with towel and soapy water. It’s awkward; we’re embarrassed. We have smelly feet and gammy toenails. We’re afraid that if we take our socks or stockings off, we’ll never get them back on again.

Like Peter, we can’t cope with the vulnerability. We might convince ourselves that we’re just being modest, but really, I think we want to remain in control.

Bishop Hugh Nelson, who was until recently a vicar in this diocese, once told me that when he was a member of the L’Arche community, supporting those with learning difficulties, the central defining act of their year, was mutual foot-

washing, where each person lovingly washed the feet of the person next to them, before being blessed by that person in return. There were no exceptions and no excuses, because this was the act that defined everything about their community, the sort of relationship they intended to embody with one another the whole year round.

So, this is Jesus' first lesson with the towel: we must learn to receive gifts humbly; we must accept our vulnerability and our dependency; and we must allow ourselves to be loved. Only then can we learn how to serve.

Before we can truly serve and love others in the way Jesus asks us to, we must first experience what it is like to be on the receiving end. It makes sense if you think about it. Unless we're aware how it feels to be vulnerable and dependent on the kindness of others, our own caring is at risk of being aloof or condescending. Like the Pharisees, we risk looking down on others who can't meet our standards. Many in our society today, look at those living in poverty, or facing discrimination, and because they've never suffered in that way, their support is grudging if it's even given at all.

And then, when Jesus begins to serve, it's not flashy or spectacular. He doesn't wave a hand and make the disciples' feet clean at no cost to himself. He gets down on his hands and knees, crawls around the floor with a basin of dirty water and demonstrates just how inelegant and exhausting love will always be.

It's worth noticing that Judas also gets his feet washed. God the Son washes the feet of his betrayer. Maybe that was the last straw for Judas. For him, Jesus was supposed to be the warrior king, not grovelling on the floor with a woman's towel. Almost immediately, Judas goes out into the night to do his deed.

This, then, is the third lesson of the towel and the foot-washing. Acts of humble service can also be powerful acts of forgiveness and reconciliation. You'll remember that above all things, Jesus' death on the Cross embodies the reconciliation of humanity with God. Judas traded God for a bag of silver, but God turned it into redemption for everyone.

Even in the twenty-first century, foot-washing as an act of reconciliation has still not lost its potency. At the 2004 Forum on World Evangelisation, a foot-washing ceremony featured members of formerly divided communities, such as Hutu and Tutsi, Israeli and Palestinian. And in 2006, a former official of the South African government washed the feet of anti-apartheid activists as an act of public apology.

This strange piece of cloth around my neck is a powerful symbol of so much of the way of Jesus: Vulnerability, Service, Reconciliation.

And all this is before we eventually come to the verse that gives Maundy Thursday its name. Verse 34: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” Why Maundy? It comes from the Latin – *mandatum* – meaning ‘command’. And this is why the Queen gives out Maundy money – not even the monarch is exempt from Jesus’ command.

Go back a few centuries and the monarch obeyed the command by getting on their hands and knees to wash the feet of beggars. Records from 1556 show that Mary the 1st washed the feet of 41 women (reflecting her age) while “ever on her knees” although scented water was used to disguise the unpleasant odours of the poor, and their feet were washed three times before the queen got near them! Later monarchs understandably dispensed with this indignity and gave out food, clothing, and later, money, but something, perhaps, was lost.

The point is that when it came time for Jesus, king of kings, to summarise his teaching at the last supper, he began and ended with a demonstration of vulnerable, loving, reconciling service, and a command that we should do the same. So I hope and pray that the next time your priest dares to bring out a bowl of water for foot-washing, there will be a queue all the way down the aisle! We love because God first loved us.