

MAUNDY THURSDAY 01-04-2021 *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Exodus 12:1-4, 11-14; Psalm 116:1-2, 11-18; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' Jesus answered, 'You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.' Peter said to him, 'You will never wash my feet.' Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.' Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!' Jesus said to him, 'One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.' For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, 'Not all of you are clean.' After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. When he had gone out, Jesus said, 'Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, "Where I am going, you cannot come." I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'

Today is called Maundy Thursday because 'Maundy' is from the Latin word 'mandatum', meaning command; and it was on this night that Jesus gave us a new commandment, to love one another as he has loved us.

However, Maundy Thursday is not about what WE should do; it's not about us. It's about Jesus, and what he did.

In our gospel reading we heard about Jesus washing the feet of his disciples, and then asking them if they understood what he had done for them. They probably didn't understand until after Jesus had died and been raised. In his crucifixion, Jesus demonstrated ultimate humility and self-giving; washing the feet of his friends was a foretaste of what was to come.

He said he was setting them an example, so they could do the same. Many of them were put to death, sooner or later, because they lived as disciples of Jesus and followed his example.

On that night, Peter at least was shocked that his Master would lower himself to do such a thing- probably they all were.

At that time, hospitality conventions dictated that water would be brought so that people could wash their OWN feet: it was considered demeaning even for slaves to wash the feet of another person.

What Jesus did was remarkable, unheard of, so no wonder Peter argued with him. Jesus wanted to set an example, and also to show his friends what it felt like to receive such service.

Many of us feel embarrassed or ashamed even to think about somebody providing us with physical care. When my late Father was in hospital, he kept apologising to the nurses for 'being a nuisance' because he needed to be washed and helped. He said he thought they were wonderful and he didn't know how they could do their job.

What he was REALLY saying was that he found it profoundly embarrassing to have someone doing what he thought he should do for himself- the intimate things we'd all rather do in private.

Washing or even touching the feet of another person is not something we are used to unless we are carers or nurses. And unless we are living with disabilities, being washed is something that only happens if we are in hospital and too sick to help ourselves.

For some people the thought of being dependent upon others for their personal needs is enough for them to consider ending their life. A common reason given by people who think euthanasia should be easily available is that they don't want to be dependent; they can't bear the thought of being helpless and unable to care for themselves. The sense of shame is so great that death seems preferable.

The disciples needed to overcome their shame and dismay so they could allow Jesus to wash their feet. I think Jesus was saying, 'Let me do this to you, and then you will know how it feels when YOU serve others.' We, like the disciples and countless others through the ages, need to learn this lesson. Pride in my self-sufficiency can lead to an attitude of condescension when I serve others: to the unspoken thought that 'Of course I will never need this sort of help.'

Jesus offers us the undeserved and unearned gift of God's grace, of being in restored relationship with God, Spirit-filled and blessed into eternity. If we cannot bring ourselves to accept a gift of service, such as the washing of our feet, how can we accept the incomparably greater gift of eternal life?

The stole that priests wear is deliberately reminiscent of both a towel and a yoke, reminding us that we serve in Jesus' name; we take on the yoke of service, which Jesus promises is well-fitting.

Jesus did something else on the night of his last supper, which John does not describe here but to which the writer of the first letter to the Corinthians refers.

He tells the church how the Lord's Supper came about, using words that are familiar to us because we repeat them every time we celebrate Holy Communion.

Jesus said- twice- do this in remembrance of me. Paul encourages the church not only to remember these words but to do them, to gather together regularly and often.

We need to remember and to keep telling the story so that it becomes part of us. When we remember together, the memory takes shape and becomes real, and that is the mystery of liturgy and ritual. Then it can begin to shape us.

However we understand the Eucharist, and what Jesus meant when he said, 'This is my body...this is my blood...', we know at least that Jesus gave and is giving us himself. He gave us this remembering so that in the sip of wine and the fragment of bread we can experience his presence with us.

The memory and the message are reinforced every time we do this in remembrance of him. Covid-19 has changed our liturgical practice, so we may not share the cup or wash one another's feet; and we are uncertain as to what the future holds. But we still share the Eucharist and we still serve one another as best we can, in ways that honour Christ as we protect and care for each other.

Tonight, we remember the words of Jesus to us- words that will be lived out in the days ahead as his body is broken and his blood is shed. We are called to live lives that honour his sacrifice, his giving of his whole self, as we remember and proclaim the gospel, the Good News of God's faithfulness to us and to all generations.

The Lord be with you.