

Sermon for Thursday 28th March, Year B, Maundy Thursday

Preached at St John's Baillieston

Exodus 12:1-14; I Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17,31b-35

Sermon

And so once again we arrive at the beginning of what is known in the Christian Church as the Easter Triduum - *Triduum* being Latin for 'three days', the three days between Jesus' last supper with his disciples, his arrest and crucifixion, and his resurrection on Easter morning.

Here, our readings from the bible go into an overdrive of metaphor and theological symbolism. From the book of Exodus, we hear the ancient instructions regarding the preparation of the Paschal Lamb – Pascha being derived from the Aramaic for Passover. That Jesus then becomes the lamb of God, slain as a sacrifice to protect others, is the perfect connection between the liberation of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt and the liberation of the people of God from slavery to sin. The latter is the culmination of the former.

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians, we hear the origin of some of the words the priest speaks at Holy Communion: "This bread is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me. This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me". Layer upon layer of meaning. Jesus is the sacrificial Lamb. Jesus' body is broken bread. Jesus' blood is wine outpoured. Jesus gives himself willingly for the sake of those he loves.

Then finally in John's Gospel, Jesus Christ, God's only Son, through whom and for whom the universe was made, he gets down on his knees and insists on washing the feet of his disciples, and of course the disciples hate it.

But it's not because they're embarrassed to have their feet on show. For the disciples it was utterly humiliating to see their lord and master on his knees with water and a towel. In those days, such an act was beyond menial – it was

unthinkable for any male to wash the feet of another; even a slave wouldn't be expected to do it.

The usual process was for a slave to bring water so that guests could wash their own feet. 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".

Different rules, of course, applied to women in those days, and we see this 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, when Jesus gets down to business with his towel, he is outrageously taking the role of a woman in his culture – practical, humble, and unglamorous work, but tender and loving.

This is the 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's 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 King stooping down to wash our feet! Our culture today still struggles with this. 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 find it hard to cope with the sudden vulnerability. Only one person can have their feet washed at once. They are in the limelight. God's love is focused on them in its entirety, and who can feel worthy of it? As George Herbert wrote in his beautiful poem: "Love bade me welcome, but my soul drew back, guilty of dust and sin".

I'm told that in the L'Arche community, which supports those with learning difficulties, the central defining act of their year is a mutual foot-washing, where each person lovingly washes the feet of the person next to them, before being blessed by that person in return. There are 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's 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.

It's always been my experience that before we can truly serve and love others with an open heart, we must first experience what it is like to be on the receiving end. 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.

But when Jesus begins to serve, he doesn't wave a hand and make the disciples' feet clean at no cost to himself. He could, but he doesn't. He gets down on his hands and knees, crawls around the floor with a basin of soon-to-be-dirty water and demonstrates just how inelegant and exhausting love will always be.

I always want to point out that Judas also gets his feet washed. God the Son knowingly washes the feet of his betrayer. I can easily imagine that this was the last straw for Judas. Jesus was supposed to be his hero, a warrior king, ready to throw off the yoke of the Romans, a man's man. But here he is, grovelling around on the floor doing work no man should ever touch. Almost immediately, Judas goes out into the night to do his deed.

And so, Jesus' act of humble service also becomes a powerful act of forgiveness and reconciliation. Jesus' death on the Cross embodies the reconciliation of humanity with God. Even though Judas traded God for a bag of silver, God turned that selfish, despairing act into redemption for everyone.

Even in the twenty-first century, foot-washing as an act of reconciliation has still not lost its potency. Numerous times, even in the twenty-first century, communities formerly caught up in hatred and even genocide, have engaged in mutual foot-washing as a sign of forgiveness. In the past Israelis and Palestinians have washed each other's feet. Maybe they will someday do so again.

This strange piece of cloth around my neck is such a powerful symbol of so much of the way of Jesus: Vulnerability, Service, Reconciliation. As a priest I was taught to kiss it, every time I place it around my neck, or remove it after a service.

Eventually we 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." Maundy comes from the Latin – *mandatum* – meaning 'command'. And this is why the monarch gives out Maundy money at Easter – not even the king is exempt from Jesus' command.

So, 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. We love because God first loved us. So let him love you, even though that love will soon take him to the Cross.