

## **Sermon for Thursday 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2026, Year A, Maundy Thursday**

**Preached at St John's Baillieston**

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

### **Sermon**

Each year on Maundy Thursday we remember what has become known to us as the Last Supper – the final time that Jesus sat down and ate and drank with his disciples. This event appears in all four Gospels, but on Maundy Thursday it is always John's Gospel that we read the story from, and in John's Gospel the story is just a little bit different to what we see in Matthew, Mark and Luke.

In John's version the supper takes place a day earlier for a start. Instead of the Last Supper being the Passover meal itself, John reports that it takes place on the day before, so that Jesus being handed over to be crucified happens exactly as Passover begins and as the Passover lamb is being slain in the Jerusalem Temple. John clearly wants to emphasise that Jesus is indeed the spotless lamb that God himself is providing for the annual sacrifice in honour of the exodus from slavery in Egypt.

There are clearly significant similarities between what Jesus is doing at the culmination of his ministry in Jerusalem and the older story of the Exodus, but there are also some major differences. Just as the Israelites came to Egypt from the land of Canaan and later departed from Egypt to return to the promised land, so Jesus has come from God and is now departing to return home to God. Just as the liberation of the Hebrews from Egypt was the consummate expression of God's love for Israel, so Jesus's return to the Father through his crucifixion was the fullest expression of God's love for all humanity.

But what's different is the way that this love is expressed. For most of their history, the People of Israel experienced God's love in terms of deliverance from

their enemies. They trusted that if they were threatened by neighbouring nations then God would see their afflictions, hear their cries, witness their suffering, and come down with might and power to free them from destruction, and instead wreak vengeance on those who had oppressed them. And leading up to the time of his death, Jesus does seem to be following something of this protective pattern, with a vigorous defence of the poor and vulnerable from their oppressors, and dramatic healings culminating with the raising of Lazarus from the dead, which happens just before Palm Sunday. These were loving acts of power and divine authority that the people would have recognised as being true to the character of a mighty God who repeatedly protected and liberated his people from slavery and death.

But then Jesus starts to demonstrate a radically different understanding of love that must have horrified his disciples and all those who had cheered his arrival on a donkey. Now Jesus makes it clear that he is no longer going to protect himself or his disciples from death, but instead he is going to freely, voluntarily and completely offer himself into the power of those who hate him, leaving his followers helpless and bereft.

And he does this in John's Gospel by first kneeling down with a towel and a bowl of water, and he washes his disciples' feet. This profound act only appears in John, but it's such an important symbol of the humility with which divine love now expresses itself, that we have this same reading every single Maundy Thursday.

Washing feet and going meekly to the Cross is not the sort of protective, strong-armed love that God's people had come to expect. In fact, it begins to look more like the sort of humiliation and punishment that Israel had experienced in times of God's wrath, when God refused to defend his people from their enemies because of their sins. It is perhaps no surprise then that Jesus's actions start to

push away even his closest followers, with Judas deciding to betray him, and Peter later denying he even knew him.

It was surely perfectly reasonable for all those who had been following Jesus in his ministry and teaching to fully expect that he would continue to demonstrate ever more dramatic shows of divine power. If he could raise people from the dead, then surely these were clear signs that the Messiah was about to throw off the shackles of Roman occupation and oppression, and replace the leaders of the Jews with his own disciples, whom he had declared would be given thrones from which they were to judge the twelve tribes of Israel.

This foot-washing, then, is the moment when so many of the hopes and dreams of Jesus's disciples begin to be dashed. Simon Peter can't even accept it. "You will never wash my feet," he declares, just as he had previously refused to accept Jesus's prediction that he would suffer and die in Jerusalem.

Jesus understands that his followers will not be able to accept what he is doing. He has warned them that they won't understand it until later. Not until the Resurrection will they understand God's purpose – and even then, only a slight glimmer of it. For now, all they have are the fraying threads of trust in the man they have been following and learning from for the last three years.

This man, whom they believe to be the Christ, God's Anointed One, cannot reveal the fulness of God's love through words, but only through his actions. He could spend years trying to teach the power of voluntary humility and self-sacrificial service and they still wouldn't get it. Love cannot be taught through words; it can only be lived and received and experienced. And so, having risen from the table and knelt before each of his disciples in turn – even the one who was to betray him – he then commands his disciples, including us, to wash one another's feet, and he commands us to love one another in the same way we have experienced his love for us.

This is where the word 'Maundy' comes from – the Latin 'mandatum' meaning 'command'. Perhaps it seems strange, almost contrary, to be commanded to love. But I suspect that if Jesus had not stated it quite so forcefully as his final command, we would have sought almost any excuse to retreat from it or try to redefine love as something entirely more dignified than our Lord on his knees. But this is the example that God commands us to follow: to take bowl and towel – whether metaphorical or literal – and to serve one another with open and vulnerable hearts, in a foretaste of heaven.