

Maundy Thursday
John 13:1-17;31b-35
Father Christopher

'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.'

In the name of the Father, ...

I have a question for you: do you think it was hard for the disciples to love each other? Do you think they loved Judas? Do you think Jesus loved Judas? Well, Jesus was actually surprisingly close to Judas. Remember, while we are told through the gospel that Judas was the one who would betray Jesus, Satan only enters into him when he is handed a piece of bread by Jesus, following which he plays his dreadful part in the passion. Before that, Jesus has supper with him in the house of those whom he **was closest to**, Mary, Martha and their brother Lazarus; Judas had looked after the common purse; And he betrayed Jesus with a kiss.

I don't know about you, but I'm not on kissing terms with many people. Being kissed by the person who is betraying you is a truly awful thing, just as betraying someone in that way must be for the perpetrator. And in these stories it is important to imagine ourselves as potentially either the betrayed or the betrayer, for in greater or lesser ways we have surely all been both.

Yet, despite this betrayal, Judas was an apostle. And I don't think we should assume he was simply playing a part. He must have gone out with the rest, preaching, converting people, casting out demons and healing people. He was chosen for the work of an apostle, as we all are, and yet something went horribly wrong.

Peter also betrayed Jesus, and we are perhaps more used to thinking with Peter, 'There but for the grace of God go I'. Judas's intentional planning on the other hand is one step too far; too heinous even to imagine. But we read of people doing crueller things every day in our newspapers. And so, it is vain to imagine that we too do not have this potential; even if we might think it unlikely that we will behave in such a way.

Judas after all doesn't actually kill Jesus. And surely the Roman soldiers and Jewish police could have found Jesus on their own if necessary. No, it is the betrayal that is so awful, not whether or not that played an essential part in Jesus's ultimate death. The fact that it might have made no real difference to anyone other than Judas makes it all the more pathetic. But that is what evil is: it rarely takes the form of great plots to do obviously horrific things. It is more often pathetic cowardice, failing to have the will to do the *right* thing.

Judas had the capacity to love, and the capacity to fall short; and he was loved by Jesus consistently when doing one and when doing the other.

Jesus doesn't tell us to imitate him in many places: in fact, the only two are in ritual, or liturgical actions. In the breaking of the bread and the sharing of wine: '*do this in remembrance of me*', and in the washing of each other's feet: '*So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.*' Just in case you are doubting that this is a ritual washing, two things

confirm it for us. Firstly, that Jesus makes quite clear to Peter that he is not in need of real washing: *'One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean.'* The fact that this happens during the meal. What is the point of washing someone's feet once they have already, in this case, reclined and have their feet on the sofa, in the way that people ate then?

No, Jesus takes off his robe (and so would have been standing in a loin cloth), and puts a towel on himself, so that he not only behaved like a slave, but looked like one. As well as imagining the shame of doing what Jesus did, try imagining washing Judas's feet, knowing what he was about to do to you. In most of us, even if we could make such a gesture, it would be hard for us to mean it deep down; to really love the person.

With Jesus however that love is absolute. And he commands us to follow him. That is why this is called Maundy Thursday: Maundy, from *mandatum*, the Latin for a command. What might such a demonstration of love look like today however? Well, four years ago, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Pope convened a conference of Sudanese leaders, whose fighting has led to many thousands of deaths. At the end, the Pope knelt on the floor and he kissed each of their feet in turn. How do you respond to that? Those people have many grievances, a number of which they had been airing; and they had been responding to each other's grievances. In a sense there can be no right conclusion to such conversations, the roots of which have been lost. And yet a gesture of love like that cuts across the dialogue. First, the Vice President of Sudan started to cry, tears rolling down her cheeks. Then others. Now, I am not naïve, and I don't think His Holiness is. This won't have solved everything, or indeed anything. But, at the same time, how can things be the same as they were?

Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, *'You have heard that it was said, You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.'* But I say to you, *love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.'* And this he puts into action in washing even Judas's feet. And the pope kisses the feet of those who are responsible, between them, for many deaths.

Who do you find it hard to love? Whether because they irritate you – and let us not underestimate the power of irritation! Or because you disagree about something important, or because they have really hurt you? Most people think you have to *fall* in love, and perhaps they're right when it comes to romantic love, but we can also **decide** to love others, however hard that may be. And it is not just a possibility. Jesus commands us to do this, and even more than this, he tells us that this is to be the one thing by which we are known: *'By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'*

Our love for each other, within the church, and for the world, should shine out; it should be a thing for people to marvel at and shout Alleluia for. Imagine that: people seeing our love and shouting *'Alleluia. Praise God that we have those good followers of Jesus at St Mary Abbots in our midst.'* But to do it, we are to abase ourselves; to make ourselves the slaves of others; and to wash their feet – and to allow others to wash ours. *'By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'* Amen