

Sermon for Maundy Thursday 2022

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Mother Emma

At the heart of Maundy Thursday, we find Jesus' New Commandment – that we should love one another, as he has loved us. The word “Maundy” itself comes from the Latin “mandatum” or command, and during that Last Supper with his disciples, Jesus distilled everything he had taught them into one instruction, which he had already demonstrated vividly by kneeling and washing the feet of each one.

The events of Maundy Thursday remind us that true love involves humility and vulnerability; neither of them popular concepts in modern culture, any more than they were in the shame and honour culture of the Roman Empire or of first-century Galilee.

Today (as then) we see all around us a world built on power and competition, an emphasis on putting oneself or one's own interests first, of demonstrating capability and might and even aggression, rather than humility and servanthood.

Either humbly washing the feet of others, or allowing one's own feet to be washed, can involve making ourselves vulnerable in a way which may make us deeply uncomfortable.

Peter's agonised protest, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?” is perhaps the way many of us feel when we become conscious that we are being freely offered care and loving-kindness. We wonder whether this will undermine our own, hard-won image of being “together” or “on top of things”; perhaps we wonder, like Peter, if it is something we deserve, or alternatively if it will make us feel indebted to others. But the truth is, that it is only in giving AND receiving loving kindness and generosity, as Jesus taught us, that we are truly drawn into the forgiving, encircling love of God, reflected in the love between Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

During our foot-washing this evening, as is traditional on Maundy Thursday, the choir will sing, “Ubi Caritas”: *Where charity and love are, God is there.* In the first year of his Papacy, the current Pope Francis caused a great stir by visiting a young offenders' prison on Maundy Thursday, and washing the feet, among others, of a young Muslim woman prisoner.

Until then, Roman Catholicism only allowed the washing of men's feet, as a visual enactment of the washing of the twelve apostles; shortly after this event, however, the Pope issued a decree, in which, following his own example, he encouraged Catholics everywhere to wash the feet of both men and women, saying, “We have to help each other, every one.” He has maintained that “It is not in constant introspection that we encounter the Lord.” “Holy Week challenges us to step outside ourselves.

Whether this means seeking opportunities to serve others, or having the humility to allow others to serve us, or whether it is in showing unconditional love regardless of what we may – or may not - gain in return; Maundy Thursday offers us the chance to step outside ourselves, and to love even those whom we find it hard to love.

Immediately after the Last Supper, Jesus and his disciples went out to Gethsemane. There, Jesus would ask them to stay awake with him (which they didn't); he would be arrested (and they ran away), and he would be interrogated, while Peter denied even knowing him. It is this stark contrast with the loving intimacy of the foot-washing which reminds us just how hard it is to love unconditionally, when even those with whom we have shared our vulnerability may let us down.

And yet Christ continued to love each one of his disciples; giving Peter the chance later to redeem himself, and filling them all with the strength and courage of the Holy Spirit to go out as his messengers to the world.

To love one another as Jesus has loved us is far from an easy instruction; it involves humility, generosity, self-sacrifice, forgiveness even when trust is broken. Yet it is in our efforts to imitate Christ's humble, unconditional love for all, that we will find God in our midst.

"Where charity and love are, God is there."