

Maundy Thursday 2016

1 Corinthians 11:23-26;
John 13:1-17, 31b-35.

'Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him.
Behold – your God!

. . . My children', says Jesus tenderly to these, his closest friends, 'I will be with you only a little longer . . . where I am going, **you** cannot come' - But, this is how you will survive and how you need to live when I am gone . . . 'I am giving you a **new** commandment: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. Everyone will **know** you are my disciples if you love one another."

What's so new in this commandment? In Matthew's gospel, when the Pharisees were testing Jesus as to which was the greatest commandment, he had replied, quoting Moses "Love the Lord your God with all your heart with all your soul and with all your mind." And then says "This is the first and greatest commandment, And the second is like it: Love your neighbour as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Now, seated with his disciples, Jesus adds a new commandment – He tells them to "Love one another. As I have loved you, **SO** you must love one another - in exactly the same way as I have loved you – even by washing each other's feet. This is how the world will see God, once I have gone away from you.

Jesus, their Teacher, their Lord, their host at this evening meal, has chosen to become their lowliest servant; he has knelt before each of them and washed the day's travel off their dusty smelly sandaled feet. In doing this, Jesus reveals the full extent of his love for them, and commands them to love one another in the same way. Even the most menial tasks are not to be despised, but to be done by all of us, with love and gentleness, to meet an immediate practical need but also to express a far deeper truth – the unconditional love of God.

When Jesus gives them this new commandment, Judas has just gone - out into the night. Jesus knows his time has come. Now he must leave the world. This is the last opportunity he will have to explain to his disciples the true nature of who he is, the fullness of God's love for them, and the implications for them of his impending departure, through the death he knows he must now face.

What a week it has been! Jerusalem is in turmoil - the city bursting with people – with noise and bustle everywhere, excited crowds, here for the Passover feast, are jostling to see and hear this itinerant preacher called Jesus. The man who had brought his dead friend Lazarus back to life; this Jesus, feted as King as he rode into the city on the back of a donkey, a simple working farm animal, yet chosen by Jesus for this moment; crowds shouting – "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the King of Israel!" In the days following that extraordinary triumphal entry into the city, all

sorts of people came to hear Jesus speaking of himself as the Light – and many heard the voice of God in the thunder “I have glorified my name, and will glorify it again!” The Pharisees were enraged, accusing him of blasphemy. They were panicking because the crowds clearly believed he was some kind of Messiah. “Look how the whole world has gone after him!” they said and intensified their plot to kill him.

Jerusalem, in these few days, has become the spiritual battleground between the blazing Light of God’s Kingdom in Jesus, and the Darkness of betrayal and death.

Getting away from the crowds, Jesus has gathered his closest friends quietly in an upper room. John tells us ‘The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot to betray Jesus. Now he was to show them the full extent of his love’ – to reveal to them the full glory of God in himself.

John V Taylor, for me one of the most inspiring 20th century Christian writers, preached a Maundy Thursday sermon in 1986, exactly 30 years ago. I’d like to quote part of what he said, since I cannot put it better:

Entitled “Behold your God”, it is based on this verse “If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example that you also should do as I have done to you.” John Taylor says:

“An example to copy, yes, but far, far more than that. Jesus was not saying ‘See, I have set you a good example of humility - go and do likewise’. He was saying ‘I have just shown you a faint reflection of God. Be perfect with your heavenly Father’s perfection’. What Jesus did for his disciples in the Upper Room was to give them the ultimate truth about his Father’s love for them.

*The manner in which the opening words of this chapter set the stage makes this quite clear. First we are led to expect the final revelation of Christ’s love for his own. He had always loved them, and now he was to show the uttermost extent of that love. But we are also carefully keyed up for an ultimate unfolding of the secret of God himself. Jesus, we are told, knew that God had entrusted to him the whole task of revelation. He, like a true ambassador, had come from God and was soon to return to God. There were only a few hours left and the moment had arrived for the last veil to be drawn aside and **the Creator’s true nature disclosed**. So, without a word, he rose from the table, pulled off the seamless robe, wrapped a towel round his waist, poured water into a basin and started washing the disciples’ feet. **“Behold your God”**.*

John Taylor continues: When the Son of God took the form of a household slave, he lost nothing of his godlikeness, for that is God’s role. The one who returns to the kitchen after the guests have left, to begin the washing up and scrub the floor is most like God at that moment. The cleaners who wake in the small hours and walk the empty streets to clear up yesterday’s mess in our schools and offices have more of God in their action than the head teacher or the managing director. Like the patient seas in Keats’ poem, ‘the moving waters at their priest-like task of pure ablution round earth’s human shores’, our Creator has been cleaning up the mess, in ceaseless serving love, from the beginning of time, for there is no-one else who can do it. ‘If I do not wash you, you have nothing in common with me’ . . . St. John deliberately gives us this incident in place of the institution of the

eucharist, as the other gospel writers do . For him the breaking and sharing of the bread and the pouring and the giving of the wine make exactly the same disclosure of God our Father as the washing of the feet. God is he who gives himself in love. God is he who put himself out in service to his world. God is he or she who is wounded for our healing, broken for our forgiving. God is he who shares himself in an eternal exchange of life for life, a ceaseless interflow of love and belonging.

When you feel resentful, as we all do, over the chores of your inescapable service of other people, look again at the broken bread and the outpoured wine. And when, having given that service, you are hurt or angry because it was not acknowledged or was taken for granted, look upon the basin and the towel.”

So how can we respond?

Nicholas King suggests that in washing the disciples' feet, Jesus is offering a new understanding of the Eucharist, namely that you are not celebrating it properly unless you bring to it, or take from it, a commitment to service, even menial service. Each time we participate in Holy Communion we must come as we are and leave as changed people. Jesus' words: 'The one who has been cleansed needs only to have his feet washed' could be a reference to both baptism (having been cleansed) and the continuing need for confession and absolution (having one's feet washed again and again to get rid of the stains that one picks up on the journey through life). Jesus tells his disciples that they must behave precisely in this way to each other.

Can we do this? **Can** we demonstrate the Glory of God through the love we give others?

St Irenaeus in 2nd century described The Glory of God as 'a human being fully alive'. John Taylor adds "God is more concerned that his children are fully alive than that they are religious. So in our church life we must build up the religion that makes people more aware and sensitive and brings them to life, but set our face, as Jesus did, against the religion that deadens the hearts and minds of people. We need to be reminded that Jesus said "Behold, I am making all things new".

Wake Up! If we want to become fully alive, we need to Wake Up! Our church life might look ok, and impress us and some others, but we need to be sure our faith is really rooted in our hearts and in God. John challenged us here at St. Stephens a couple of weeks ago in his talk from Revelation about the church in Sardis. This is the church to which Jesus says "you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead . . . remember what you have received and heard; obey it and repent."

Obey what we have received and repent! Jesus' command is that we Love one another, as he has loved us, as he has shown us. He doesn't mean we have to agree with one another, but in love we must listen to each other, thrash out our differences so that we can live and work together creatively. Not setting up factions, or taking sides, but listening and learning from each other.

In our first reading Paul is writing to the young church in Corinth, saddened to hear of divisions among them, and their defiling of the eucharist by taking the bread and wine in

an unworthy manner. He appeals for unity, as it is only as we are united in love, and open to listening to the prompting of the Holy Spirit that we can become effective as serving, loving people within our own community, and beyond.

We need to work together, to bring God's love, healing and growth within our community, and the wider world. To quote Derek Worlock and David Sheppard, the Catholic and Anglican bishops in Liverpool in the 1970's, who worked closely together to bring healing across a desperately entrenched sectarian divide " – the christian life is always "Better Together". We are not meant to go it alone, thinking we have the right way to do things. Together is how God intends life to be.

Jesus sent his disciples out in pairs to heal the sick. I was chatting with John this morning about our two projects, Urban Hope and the Manna, appreciating how well they are going. We were commenting on how they are both being run by a pair of people, Alex and Joy at UH, and Rachel and Kate at the Manna. Pairs of people with very different skills, but working together they each make a very effective team.

How are we being challenged today to revitalise our relationship with God? to take hold of his unconditional love for us, so that we can become more fully alive? So that we can work together and love without strings attached, and bring healing and growth into our relationships with each other, and with the whole of creation.

In her recent lecture in St Paul's cathedral, Katharine Jefferts-Schori was talking about the Genesis creation stories – how human beings are given **Dominion** over the creatures of earth – the word Dominion coming from Domus – meaning house, home – dominion being housekeeping – we have a responsibility to look after the earth and all that is in it. To enable it to give of its best, as God meant things to be. God's earth gives us all we need for life – we are here to look after it, for the benefit of all, not to exploit it for our own short-term ends.

She spoke of the first resurrection morning – of Mary Magdalen weeping at the empty tomb. As the risen Christ spoke to Mary, she mistook him for the gardener. In a sense she was right – Jesus is the Gardener. If we allow him to, He prunes us, grubs out the weeds, and plants us in the place where we can flourish and bear fruit. We now have Christ's mandate to serve, to care for the earth, whose God-given resources sustain life for whole of creation.

There is so much wrong in the world today, the prospect of being involved in improving things often makes us liable to despair and become cynical. How can we remain hopeful and become instrumental in bringing in the Kingdom of God? It seems an overwhelming task. But we are not expected to do any of this in our own strength.

I think it was at John's induction service here just over a year ago, that Bishop Adrian reminded us that living the Kingdom of God **is** up to us - God has no Plan B. Jesus left an unruly unreliable bunch of Galileans to continue his life's work on earth. We, the ill-assorted members of the church across the world, are the inheritors of that commission. .

It is all up to us – but we are not on our own – God is with us –Paul wrote to the Philippians “continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for **it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose**”.

We must be open to letting God work within us, ill-assorted as we may be, we must love one another and work together as his church.

We are the body of Christ. We are called into one body for the common good. May God be at work in us, as the lovely prayer of St. Theresa of Avila reminds us -

“Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which must look out Christ’s compassion on the world. Yours are the feet with which He is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which he is to bless men now.”

May we allow God to use us, unfinished, confused and messy as we may be, to his Glory in this place and in his world. Amen.

Refs.

John V Taylor “The Incarnate God”. Continuum, Morehouse Publishing 2004. pp69-70 ‘Behold Your God’

Little Book of Lent 2016 – John V Taylor, Easter Sunday.

Nicholas King “The New Testament” Kevin Mayhew 2004 p234 re John 13 + various comments on other passages

Lecture at St Paul’s Cathedral by Katharine Jefferts – Schori on 3 March 2016