



Maundy Thursday Eucharist

Sermon by Revd Alison Thabethe



Thursday 14 April 2022

READINGS

Exodus 12: 1-14; Psalm 116: 1-2, 11-18; 1 Corinthians 11: 23-26; John 13: 1-17, 31b-35

To love and be loved

Today is Maundy Thursday. The name comes from the Latin root that means mandate. It refers to our mandate as Jesus' followers – the commandment read from the Gospel of John 13:34,35 – “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples; if you love one another.”

The commandment is linked to the action which Christ demonstrates around the table. As their Lord and teacher, he wraps a towel around his waist and shocks them by taking on the role of a servant, washing their dusty feet. By this act, Jesus demonstrates the essential characteristics of the type of love that he commands: a love that serves. It is not some fluffy sentimental feeling from a Hallmark greeting card or romantic ballad. It is hands-on and tangible. It disrupts any preconceived idea of the human power dynamics between the one who serves and the one who is served.

We repeat this commandment to love daily and weekly in our liturgy, perhaps to a point where we take the strong use of words for granted. Do we not believe that love happens to us – that we fall in love? What love is this that must be commanded? The more time we spend with some people, the more difficult they are to love. Jesus was surely not telling us that being nicer to people was the qualification to be his follower (although sometimes we pretend that is what he meant). And if you are like I am, your feelings don't respond to commands. We respond to a command not with a feeling but with an action.

Jesus demonstrates a sacrificial love that will end in death. The passage begins with the words, “Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (John 13:1). It is this love that is drawing him towards the cross. The gospel passage repeatedly reminds us of the events that are to follow, including that Jesus was aware of Judas's betrayal. This is the love of Jesus' command: not a version of love linked to ego and self-interest, but love that is described as self-giving and self-emptying.

And it applies to all of us – that we must both love and allow ourselves to BE loved in this way. I'd like to consider the link between our ability to serve and to be served, or, as demonstrated in the foot-washing that we commemorate tonight, to love and to be loved. To do this, I'd like us to look at the role played by two people: Mary of Bethany, and the disciple Peter. When I think of Jesus washing his disciples' feet, I am reminded of the event which took place five days before this. It was another meal, this time hosted in Jesus' honour at the home of his close friends Lazarus, Martha and Mary. Mary took a pint of expensive perfume, poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. The parallels are striking in the way that John recounts the events. Mary's action of washing Jesus' feet with perfume and her hair is not just

one of service but unmistakably one of love. Preaching on this passage recently, Fr Moses spoke of how the fragrance of the perfume and the action of massaging Jesus' feet would have been intimate and comforting as Jesus took refuge with this family who were dear to his heart. In the face of objection and criticism, Jesus receives Mary's action of anointing and of love, also speaking of his imminent death and perhaps preparing himself for the trauma of the week that lies ahead. It was a much-needed moment of tenderness.

Rev. Nadia Bolz Weber has also reflected on the parallels. She writes:

*I've wondered all week, how did he receive this love? Was he like me, hesitant, suspicious, resistant? Was he embarrassed? ... Or did he receive this love with a heart that was open knowing this was exactly what he needed to get through the last week of his life. I don't know. ... I do not know how he received the love from Mary in the moment she offered it to him. But given what he did at a dinner five days later, I know that Jesus became what he received.*²

Jesus became what he received.

Now we turn to Peter's reaction to Jesus washing his feet. One of my favourite artworks is this painting by Fr Sieger Köder. It depicts Peter's emotional conflict in the moment when Jesus kneels to wash Peter's feet:

He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"

Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand."

"No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet."

Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."

"Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!" (John 13:6-9)



In the painting, Peter is seated on a low stool, his feet in a bowl of murky water.

His left hand is raised as he exclaims, "Stop!" not wanting to accept Christ washing his feet. But at the same time, his other hand, firm on Jesus' shoulder, says something very different: "Well then, if you must wash me, wash all of me!" This is the push and pull, the giving and receiving of grace.

We become what we receive. We also become what we enact. It means abandoning ego and laying aside our moral accounting of who is or is not worthy of love, including ourselves. Literal and figurative washing of feet is an act of transformative grace. We are the means, not the Source. Encountering the disruptive love and grace of Jesus creates in us the ability to love one another.

Notice in the painting Jesus' vulnerability, kneeling in front of Peter, the soles of his own bare and rough feet prominent in the foreground. And notice Jesus' face, faintly reflected in the water in which he has washed the others' feet. This is the murky water that represents the mess and muddle of human lives. At this place, we hear the commandment: "Love one another as I have loved you." As we contemplate this painting, we might ask what God is saying to us in this moment.

¹ Jesus Washing Peter's Feet by Sieger Köder

This description is adapted from a Maundy Thursday reflection for the Diocese of Norwich, available at <https://www.dioceseofnorwich.org/app/uploads/2020/04/Maundy-Thursday-Reflection.pdf>

² Nadia Bolz Weber <https://thecorners.substack.com/p/a-mini-sermon-for-maundy-thursday?s=r>