

Jesus comes to us and serves us

A sermon preached by Revd Dr William Whyte on Maundy Thursday 1 April 2021

Refs: Exodus 12.1-14; I Corinthians 1. 23-26; John 13.1-17,31b-35

Evening worship on Maundy Thursday is often rather an awkward time. To be sure, the symbolism of foot washing is undeniably powerful. It beautifully evokes the idea of absolute service. The Gospel reading makes this clear, telling of Jesus' insistence that he should serve his own disciples in this way. Although their master, although their teacher, although their leader, he gets down on his knees and performs this most intimate, most servile task. The disciples are initially appalled, but then discover what it means and get some hint of why it matters. Jesus reinforces it, declaring 'I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.'

Knowing more now than the disciples did then, we can see this moment in all its importance. For in washing their feet, Jesus is not just giving them a good lesson in service. He's also acting out -- making visible -- something fundamental about his very nature. Jesus is God. He's God come to earth; God in human form; God who has come down to our level -- indeed, God who has descended lower than any of us, serving and suffering and dying for us. Maundy Thursday made all that visible. It showed God's self-emptying, God's utter service to us all.

So this is a big day: a day saturated with theological meaning and divine importance. Maundy Thursday tells us something about our calling: a calling that we should serve one another, that we should love one another. It also tells us something about Jesus: that in him we have an image of total service of utter self-giving. And, of course, the two messages are linked. We are called to follow Jesus by serving each other. We are urged to imitate him by abandoning our pride, our selfishness, our desire for status, and choosing instead a life of self-giving love.

We perform this each year through our own act of foot washing -- and of course this is where all the awkwardness creeps in. In First-Century Palestine, the disciples reacted with horror to Jesus' actions precisely because foot washing was familiar, and done only by slaves. It was a transgressive and powerful symbol because it turned upside down everything they expected. In Twenty-First Century England, there is no such tradition and so, far from subverting a commonplace activity, our foot washing introduces something new and odd and just a little bit embarrassing, if we're honest.

Well this year, we don't have that awkwardness. But we do have another. For another year, some of us will be at home when we would usually be at Church. And, even those who are able to come to Church will find themselves doing something different. In the current circumstances it's not thought safe or sensible to abandon social distancing for Maundy Thursday. We will read about Jesus' actions, but not be able to imitate them ourselves. won't be able to enact that image of service and self-giving love.

Now, some of us, if we're honest, might secretly be rather grateful not to have to expose ourselves in the usual way. But others will regret the loss of tradition, the absence of this tangible, visible, powerful enactment of Jesus's commands. Because there is a loss -- and even the loss that of that annual awkwardness is a lack. There's something missing here and we might as well admit it.

In fact, admitting it -- accepting that there is an absence, a lack today -- is the first step towards thinking about how we should respond to that. Each year, however awkwardly, we re-enact Jesus' powerful example. This year we will not. So what are we meant to do instead?

We're meant to do nothing. It's here that a third element of today's Gospel comes into play. Jesus' actions taught his disciples that they should serve one another. His service made visible something powerfully important about him. But Maundy Thursday also expresses another theme. The disciples have to learn to let Jesus serve them: it doesn't come easily, it doesn't seem natural, it seems awkward and somehow wrong. But without that willingness sit there, without that readiness to let Jesus serve them, the whole event would be meaningless.

And that's where we are now. We can't do the thing we want to do. We can't make this happen. The rite we usually enact; the actions we usually undertake: they just aren't available to us. Instead, we have to sit here and let Jesus do the work. We have to do nothing – even when we're desperate to do something. Even when we're longing to get back to normal, to get back to work. Like the disciples, we have to stop and let Jesus come to us – come to us and come to serve us.

This evening, then, let's be aware of the awkwardness. But let's also embrace it. Let's sit and share this time together. Let's sit and allow Jesus to serve us, which is his heart's desire and our salvation.

Amen