

Maundy Thursday, 28/3/24

***Readings: Exodus 12: 1-14; I Corinthians 11.23-26;
John 13.1-17, 31b-35***

Lord, who on the night before your passion took towel and water and washed the feet of your disciples: give us understanding of what you have done, and teach us to follow the example of your humility, that by love we may serve one another for love of you. Amen

When I was working on a newspaper, I was often invited to special meals, both to report on the event and also as a thank you for previous press coverage - anything from literary lunches organised by the local bookshop, and addressed by authors as various as Kenneth Williams, John Mortimer, and Monica Dickens, to the men only Conservative Businessmen's dinners, where a leading Tory MP did the honours.

There could be anything up to 200 fellow diners, most of whom you didn't know, but of course you would soon speak to them, either about the event or the host or what they were promoting or whatever. Some were witty and entertaining, some were tedious. By the end of the meal, you had usually learned quite a bit about each other, often discovering things you had in common with the

speaker, the host, or your fellow diners. Most of these dinner parties are the same, especially those where just about the only thing you have in common with the other people is that you know the hosts for some reason.

I'm sure the Last Supper was pretty much the same. However close to one another the disciples had grown over three years, I'm sure they wouldn't have thought of meeting together for a Passover meal had it not been that Jesus invited them all. In some cases, they probably only put up with their fellow-guests because they had to! I wouldn't mind betting they all felt rather honoured, and I can imagine a fair amount of bickering beforehand as to who was going to sit where.

I guess Jesus had given the servants the night off - certainly there was nobody there to attend to the immediate basic need of all the guests, which was to have a wash. But this job was for the lowliest of the low - no-one but a slave would wash the feet of guests.

No doubt each of the disciples was tired and hot, each with smelly and dirty feet, yet not one of them was prepared to make a move to serve the others. I wouldn't be surprised if one or two even looked

around and asked, "Who's going to wash our feet? There's no-one else here and it wouldn't be proper for us to do it ourselves."

I suspect none of them actually wanted to be seen to be saying, in effect, "I recognise that I am less important than you are." Like so many of us, the disciples were in the game of struggling to gain every social advantage, filled with feelings of insecurity and vulnerability. I'm sure we've all seen that look on someone's face when they feel that something is beneath them. Within churches, too, there can be a feeling of competition sometimes, as people try to prop themselves up with the feeling of accomplishment and success.

In Luke's account of the Last Supper, he tells us that on their way to the meal, the disciples were arguing about which one of them would be the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven. It's helpful to know the context, because of course Jesus cuts through it all. Jesus knows that he is about to be betrayed, denied, and abandoned by his friends, yet he still loves them. Before doing anything else, Jesus meets the needs of his dinner guests. He doesn't feel insecure about his position or his identity - the Son of God knew that he would not be diminished by humbling himself to serve his friends.

So it should be with us. The humblest of roles should not diminish us if we realise our significance as children of God. I recall my visit to the very first parish I was offered as a curate - the vicar asked me what I would do if I was in the church hall after an event and all the tables and chairs had to be cleared away. I said I would enlist some help - the more the merrier - and start clearing up. But to my utter astonishment, the vicar said, "No. It's not up to the clergy to do that sort of job. That's what other people are there for." What an extraordinary and saddening attitude - and is it any wonder I chose not to go to that parish!

I can't be the only person to have noticed that we're living in a very proud and egotistical generation. It is now considered acceptable and even normal for people to promote themselves, to praise themselves, and to put themselves first. Pride is considered a virtue by many. Humility, on the other hand, is considered a weakness. Everyone, it seems, is screaming for his or her own rights and seeking to be recognized as someone important.

The preoccupation with self-esteem, self-love, and self-glory is destroying the very foundations upon which our society was built. No culture can survive pride run rampant, for all of society depends on

relationships. When all people are committed first of all to themselves, relationships disintegrate. And that is just what is happening, as friendships, marriages, and families fall apart.

Sadly, the preoccupation with self has found its way into the church. Perhaps the fastest growing phenomenon in modern Christianity is the emphasis on self-esteem, self-image, self-fulfilment, self-promotion and other manifestations of selfism. Out of it is emerging a new religion of self-centeredness, pride--even arrogance. Voices from every part of the theological spectrum call us to join the self-esteem cult.

Scripture is clear, however, that selfism has no place in Christian theology. Jesus repeatedly taught against pride, and with his life and teaching he constantly exalted the virtue of humility. Nowhere is that more clear than in John 13.

Jesus didn't wash his disciples' feet to make a point about himself, but to show all of us how we should behave towards one another. "I have set you an example," he says. "You are to do as I have done for you." And, later on in the 13th chapter of John's gospel, Jesus places all that he has done and will do in the context of love.

I know what my feet are like and I know how unpleasant it would be for the poor person who ever had to wash them once my shoes and socks were off! When Jesus washes the feet of his disciples I think it shows that his love isn't just something vague or emotional, but something real, serving where there is real need.

Jesus demonstrated how totally he was prepared to give himself to his friends that evening - through the dramatic symbolism of the foot-washing and the words and actions of the Last Supper itself. So it is that we should remember just how important each communion service we come to is. Some people don't seem to like the idea of Christian service because it sounds too much like hard work. Yet at the Last Supper Jesus is saying, "Whenever you meet together for a meal like this, remember all I have done for you, and also that I commanded you to love one another and serve each other, just as I love you."

Remember, this is the day before Jesus' death, and rather than being preoccupied with thoughts of his crucifixion, sin-bearing, and glorification, He is totally consumed with His love for the disciples.

Knowing that He would soon go to the cross to die for the sins of the world, he is still concerned with the needs of twelve men. His love is never impersonal.

If we follow Jesus we can forget all thoughts of privilege and rank. If we are to serve the needy, they are usually going to be in the places where we don't really want to go. Those in need are not always the most pleasant people to deal with. It's easy to send some money to charity when we see famine, drought, or disaster victims on the television. But what about the needy on our doorsteps? What about the smelly old woman who lives by herself down the road and always seems offensive? Or the young mum struggling across the street with her pram and four kids in tow? It's not our job to get involved, is it?

Well, we're not asked to like or to fall in love with the people around us. We are asked to love them as Christ loves us. That involves generosity and commitment, not condemnation and carping.

It may not be very glamorous or exciting to visit grubby old ladies or to try to do something for mums with runny-nosed babies. But then again, there wasn't anything very glamorous or exciting about

washing a dozen pairs of hot and sticky feet before a meal. But Jesus did it, and then said, "You are to do as I have done for you."

And that is indeed a command – a new commandment, the *Mandatum Novum* that gives Maundy Thursday its name. A command directed at the people who meet in Christ's name and share bread and wine at the Lord's table. And maybe if we heard that command and did something about it more often, we would begin to understand more about what Christ's unconditional and great love for us is all about.

And if we begin to understand it more, then maybe we'll also be prepared to go and share that love with others practically. There's a lot of talk about getting more people into church - well, if you think that should be happening, just remember, people don't go where the action is, they go where the love is." We always need to ask ourselves - Is that love here?