

Maundy Thursday 2017

The whole of the Johannine Passion, is summed up in the very first verse of today's gospel: "Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (13:1).

Foot washing, institution of the Lord's supper, betrayal... As Bishop Kay said on Sunday, so much is going on here!

On the surface it is a Sabbath meal, telling the story, living the history of the escape from Egypt, made in haste, lamb, bitter herbs, candles, questions, and the sacramental unleavened bread and wine, but there is this underlying tension, "who is this man who raised Lazarus such a short time ago?". The hopes of the zealots that he would overthrow the Romans seem dashed, then, he washes their feet – servants work, something so simple but a momentous shift in power. "Are you going to wash my feet? "You have got to be joking!"... Then, "Wash all of me!"

What is it to be a leader? Who is this leader, on his knees? Would a king do that? A Roman general? Washing my feet is something so intimate, normal, humble, like riding on a donkey.

What is he saying to me? He seems to say, " I am not like other Gods. This is how you serve me. Wash each other's feet. Care for each other.

When you do it to the least of these you do it to me"

Hang on, what? I am slow to catch on.

Then there is the bread and wine thing – eat, drink, remember me.

Eat my body, drink my blood – disgusting! I know someone who will not come and take communion for this reason. The body and blood of Christ. The theology is complex, mystery, but here we are on our journey through holy week, our journey to the cross, eating and drinking God, taking God/Jesus into our very beings.

Then, do we, like Judas, betray him? bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh, the very ground of our being?

but that is later tonight – he goes to the Mount of olives and we fall asleep... That is later.

For now, we eat and drink together, we have our feet washed, we are fed, we are in good company, all this time learning new lessons, things hopefully we will remember later. "Unless you let me wash your feet I cannot let you be part of what I am doing". Again it is about love, love, love, love...

Having set the scene in the first verse -- the festival of the Passover -- John tells us two important things.

First, Jesus is in control of this situation. The passion in John is no tragedy but rather the fulfilment and climax of the earthly mission of the Divine Revealer.

Second, Jesus' actions and mission are dictated by love, expressed in one of the most haunting phrases of Scripture: "having loved his own..., he loved them to the end."¹

This, then, is the theme of John's portrayal of the last supper. It is a love feast in which Jesus exemplifies the sacrificial love he expects from his disciples in his washing of their feet. He sets for them a pattern of service, of humility, of bearing the burdens of another. At the cross he will institute a new Christian family by commanding two persons not related by blood (his mother and the beloved disciple) to care for each and relate as family because of their bond through him. On this night, he commands that those who would be his followers serve each other for his sake.

But there may be more at stake in this action than simply setting an example. It may be that the salvation prepared by the Father and accomplished by the Son is in fact being played out right before our eyes. Salvation, in John, comes through God's embrace of a hostile world, and therefore Jesus' death on the cross is not for one moment considered defeat or tragedy; rather it is the moment of his completing what he came to do. It is not what we -- not what anyone! -- would expect, that grace is revealed in suffering, that power is displayed through weakness, that glory is disguised in humiliation. And yet the God Jesus comes to reveal shows up

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=942

exactly where we would least expect God to be in order to redeem God's beloved creation.

For this reason, discipleship is comprised of embracing an "upside down" understanding of God, grace, and salvation, as the disciples must be cleansed/baptised? by Jesus so that they may also cleanse or baptise others. Their stature, it would appear, comes not through displays of power but servanthood, the sort of loving service modelled by Jesus. No wonder Peter is dismayed. He does not expect or, truth be told, need or want a Messiah who comes in humiliation. Yet only if he can revise his expectations of God and receive God hidden in humility can he have any part of Jesus.

What, then, of today's disciples?

Can we see the grace of God embodied in the form of the man hanging on a tree?

More to the point, on this night,

can we step into the upside down picture Jesus offers of abundant life,

life that is gained not by grabbing but releasing,

not by hoarding but by giving,

not by ruling but by serving others,

just as we have been served by Jesus? The promise of this reading and night, Maundy Thursday, is that we are, in fact, those whom Jesus has called and that those who follow his story to the end will be brought to new life in this world and the next.²

Love, for Jesus, is not about feelings and emotions but about a

choice. In Jesus' teaching if you have feet you get washed,

regardless of where those feet have been or where they are going.

That is the example and commandment he sets before his disciples and us.

The first person the disciples will have to choose to love or not love is Judas, the one who turns away, the one who walks in the night,

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=942

the one who betrays. That, also, is our first choice. Every one of us has at least one Judas in our life. Every one of us has been Judas to someone else. Sometimes we have been Judas to ourselves. Who is your Judas? Name him or her and then choose. Choose to wash and love as Jesus has washed and loved you.³

I wonder whether I am humble enough to do that too? To metaphorically or literally wash the feet of my enemies, feed them and clothe them and love them? It is a difficult ask that with Jesus help maybe I can begin to try.

Susanna

³ <https://interruptingthesilence.com/2012/04/06/all-are-washed-all-are-loved-a-sermon-for-maundy-thursday-john-131-17-31-35/>