

Holy Communion Maundy Thursday John 13:1-17 April 9th 2020

“Nowadays people know the price of everything and the value of nothing.” commented Oscar Wilde.

Over the past few months people have begun to value the way they used to live – we used to walk into a shop and buy anything we liked without social distancing, we used to go to the pub, for a meal with friends, to the theatre, the cinema and so on. Most of all perhaps, with the worry about families of all kinds, we have come to value the importance of love in our lives.

The words of Jesus that follow the washing of the disciples’ feet, ‘love one another as I have loved you’, are especially poignant today. By the washing of feet, Jesus offers us practical help to understand **how** to ‘love one another’: to love one another requires the kind of humble service which we are shown in the actions of Jesus.

We have all become very familiar with a regular washing or even scrubbing of our hands whilst singing the full two rounds of ‘Happy Birthday’. In the 1st century, everyone washed their feet equally regularly. On entering a house open-sandalled, dusty feet would be washed by a menial slave – not the male householder or a male Jewish servant but those of lower rank: a woman, a child or a non-Jew.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus **stands** up, ‘knowing that he is from God and was **going** to God’ – in other words, the Gospel writer, letting the reader into the very thoughts of Jesus, indicates how important his life and death are for those around him and for all those who will live afterwards (including us). Jesus takes an apron, ties a towel around himself, pours water and starts washing. In humility, he takes on the role of a slave, possibly living out the role of the suffering servant and demonstrating his leadership - as in the words from Psalm 25 verse 9 ‘He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way’.

Humble service often causes embarrassment - the disciples consider this an awkward moment as they did when earlier in the narrative, Mary, Lazarus’s sister,

anointed Jesus' feet with oil, foretelling the death of Jesus: social taboos are yet again being broken – protocols are not being kept.

Jesus **acts** first and then **explains** what is required of those of us who wish to be a disciple – a disciple follows the command to 'love one another' – to love God requires being a servant.

What might such humble service look like for us?

Firstly, following Christ's example, we need to be willing and prepared to serve those around us at any opportunity. Recently we have seen volunteers generously supporting the NHS, risking their own health, and we have seen many volunteers wishing to help in their own localities. Those working in the NHS risk catching Covid 19, but that does not deter them. The now ritual event of community applause for the NHS, shows our heartfelt gratitude. Father Damien, later made a saint by the Catholic Church, worked amongst a community of lepers in the 19th century in Hawaii. After living in the community for some years, he became well known for addressing his congregation with the phrase, 'We lepers' – he had risked his life to help those with leprosy and had become a leper himself. During these weeks/months many people have offered humble service though shopping, telephone calls or using social media, and especially though prayer. If you are currently in isolation, a vital service that you can offer to the world, is indeed one of prayer. We should never underestimate the power of the prayers offered by those in isolation today.

Martin Luther King said, 'Everybody can be great. Because anyone can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve... You don't have to know about Einstein's theory of relativity to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love'. Humble service is for all disciples of Christ in every corner of the world.

Secondly, as well as the giving of service we must also be open to receive it. Earlier in the gospel, Jesus accepted the anointing of his feet with oil by Mary and after some convincing, Peter and the disciples allowed Jesus to wash their feet. Strangely we can often find it harder to receive than to serve. 39 years ago, when

I was in confined to bed for two weeks – I had to receive continually from others in terms of food, childcare at home, washing and so on. It was not easy for me. I felt frustrated, irritated, worried and certainly not at peace. I had no desire to receive the goodwill and help of others but receiving and accepting God’s grace through the service of others is as important as any costly giving.

Tomorrow we remember the crucifixion – a time when we recall the costliest service, the sacrifice of Jesus. Let us then, humbly receive that offering of love poured out from Christ on the cross.

In these times of Covid 19, we neither receive communion together nor physically witness the washing of feet, which we have enacted symbolically for many years in Chester Cathedral.

Yet with gratitude, a longing to serve and an ability to receive, we dare to come together virtually through our electronic devices, along with the communion of saints. Together, we participate in the eucharistic prayer and we open ourselves up to receive the love offered by God through Christ’s death so that we might serve others. These things form the basis of all our values.

I conclude with the well-known prayer by St Ignatius Loyola:

Teach us, Good Lord,
To Serve you as you deserve;
To give and not to count the cost;
To fight and not to heed the wounds;
To labour and not to ask for any reward,
save that of knowing that we do your will.
Through Jesus Christ Our Lord, Amen.

Canon Jane Brooke