

Maundy Thursday 9th April 2020

A Night to Remember

Gospel Reading John 13 1-17, Epistle Reading Philippians 2. v. 1-8

Like all good dramas, at the beginning of this passage the audience, us readers, are let into a secret. Jesus knows what is going to happen (v 1&3). With the benefit of history so do we. But the disciples don't. So I wonder what they were expecting as they approached the house for the Passover meal. It was an annual major festival; everyone had come to Jerusalem to celebrate. There were hundreds of years of tradition. It was predictable, the food, lamb, unleavened bread, herbs. Just like our Christmas dinner but more so. Even the conversation in memory of the God's miraculous salvation and the Jews escape from Egypt was scripted. They knew exactly what was coming, so they thought.

Imagine their shock when during the meal Jesus gets up, takes off his jacket, rolls up his sleeves, puts a towel around his waist, and gets a basin and a jug of water. What is he doing? What is going on here? OK there was no servant girl to wash their feet on arrival as was the custom, but if anyone was going to start washing people's feet surely it should be one of the lesser disciples. Perhaps Jesus' behaviour is in response to the conversation recorded by Luke (22. V 24) "a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be the greatest". No sense of gravitas at this Passover meal. Jesus says ... "the greatest among you should be like the youngest and the one who rules like the one who serves". He ends with the comment that he "is among them as one who serves".

What a vivid and dramatic event. What a humiliation. Jesus the host, their Lord and Master, proclaimed King just a few days before, kneels bowed down in front of them, the position of homage. They have been used to sitting at his feet. What a reversal of roles. Their sandals are only soles and straps and offer no protection. Adult men's feet, do they smell? Or is it too dry? How many of them have trodden in something they'd rather not have? Do any of them have scars and callouses, bunions, athletes' foot, or fungal nail infection? Do you really want the person you admire most in the world to see your feet, the real you, warts

and all? Probably not. No wonder Peter says what they are all thinking “No never, you are not going to wash my feet”. This is all wrong.

Jesus’ reply suggests that getting their feet dirty is an inevitable fact of life. Easily and universally done and need washing. Just as our daily life results in our moral contamination and need for cleansing forgiveness as often as we wash our hands

Foot washing wasn’t just purely hygienic. It was a welcome. Come in. Let me take your coat. Make yourself comfortable, at home. Jesus’ foot washing also demonstrated to the disciples and us, His welcome, His acceptance and his “come as you are” attitude.

The unexpected continued relentlessly, shockingly. Judas leaves near the beginning of the meal. Why? This is protected time, a special meal; the equivalent would be no TV or mobile at the table let alone leaving. There is talk of betrayal, by whom? And talk of Jesus’ death. This is becoming more like an Agatha Christie drama. They are gathered to remember the Israelites deliverance from Egypt and now Jesus is asking them to remember him! Remember his broken body and blood poured out. It is almost obscene. Is he identifying himself with the Passover lamb whose blood was smeared to the Israelites’ door posts? His use of the Passover meal is certainly memorable, grabs their attention and will be deeply thought provoking. Jesus has hijacked the major Jewish festival.

Jesus challenges the disciples and us to love, as he loves us. From His example, that is to get down on the floor, get dirty, get contaminated, be the doormat, be humble, be the lowest, be the servant, do the things we’d rather not.

There seem to be some very topical comparisons between Jesus’ foot washing and our current situation. Perhaps we are more aware than ever of the concept of picking up viruses easily and the need for washing hands thoroughly and frequently. Washing our hands when we come in rather than foot washing, the towel worn as an apron, the barrier and PPE. His death as true servant of all, as we see bus and underground drivers, carers, nurses and doctors die in the service of others. Perhaps the thing we most would rather not being doing at the moment is being at home away from people we love, our freedom our routine. We all

have things we would rather be doing. Probably our greatest act of service to others is in obeying Government advice and our most valuable activity is praying for those serving on the frontline.

The unexpected memorable events continue that night, the disciples fail to stay awake in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus is betrayed by Judas, one of them, for money. Jesus is arrested. His trial takes place overnight. The disciples have run. If I was Jesus would I feel let down by the sequence of poor behaviour by the disciples? Angry and disappointed I would wonder if they are worth my sacrifice to come. Will He go through with it? Are they worth it? Are we? We will see tomorrow.

What will we remember from tonight?

Remember the comfort that Jesus welcomes us, accepts us, washes us, forgives, will die for us. Love us.

Remember the challenge to love as He demonstrated His love for us. Humbly, on His knees, as a servant of others getting wet and dirty, doing the job no one wanted. Maundy means mandate. It is mandatory for us to love others as Jesus loves us.

We continue to remember His words at that Last Supper in our Holy Communion just as he asked us to.