

Maundy Thursday 2018

Jesus has spent his entire ministry showing his disciples what the Kingdom of God is all about. He has called them and sent them. He has spoken thousands of words to them and they have had the privilege of watching him work, and heal, and touch, and restore. And now he looks round the table and sees their faces, some eager, some confused, some reliable and constant, others, shall we say, guarded. He looks round. And then he offers a final lesson, an enacted parable in which they are both recipient and illustration. And that lesson gives us two pillars which have to be at the heart of the church- everyone is of equal value and worth, and our language and our currency must be love.

“I wash your feet. What I do for you, you must go and do for others without exception and without excuse. This is not a choice, an option, an extra. This is everything I have come to do and share. Love one another as I have loved you.”

Jesus is leaving them with a last, vital lesson through which they will come to see everything which has happened and everything which is about to take place. He is establishing a movement which will change the world through the changed lives of those whose feet have been washed tonight. He is establishing a community which is united by its common foundation. He is building a selfless family in which the weak and the poor, the little and the voiceless are put first. He is establishing the Church.

Sam Wells, the Rector of St Martin in the Fields in London, has recently said that the problem with the Church is that we keep acting as if we are Goliath and not David. So what does tonight teach us about how to be David? What are the benchmarks of this new community, of this brave and fearless new world which we are called into by the lilting voice of Jesus?

Firstly, in this kingdom, like the ancient legend of King Arthur and the Round Table, everyone is treated the same. Jesus washes feet. All of them. He washes the feet of Peter, even though he knows that he will thrice deny even knowing him before the cock welcomes the dawn tomorrow. He washes the feet of those who will fall asleep in the garden. He washes the feet of Thomas who will demand proof that he is truly risen. And he washes the feet of Judas Iscariot, even as they turn to the door, to betrayal, to despair. Each of them receives the same. All of them are treated the same. Jesus knows them inside and out, past sins and glories and coming sins and glories alike. Each of them is equally valuable and precious in the eyes of Jesus.

And so are we. We are a community founded on the radical inclusion of Jesus. There are no Business Class let alone First Class seats in the Church. You can't pay more or do more to get more. We don't serve different menus to different people at the altar rail depending on how much they pay by Direct Debit. We come to the altar together and we receive the same bread in our hands side by side- because when the most precious gift in the world is given from the heart of God without price and without stint what does not matter is our worth in the eyes of the world and what matters absolutely, the only thing that means anything at all, is the outstretched, outpoured love of God.

Jesus washes the feet of John and Judas alike.

Secondly, in this emerging community we are told to do the same- to love others as we have been loved because we have been loved by God first. This is a community in which everyone receives the same. What they receive is love from those who have been loved by God first. We cannot control how people respond to our actions or our loving heart. Judas still goes out to betray Jesus. What we can control is what we hold out to the world, and offer to the world and build, what we build this community on.

It's not a bad rule of thumb- when we find ourselves about to disagree with someone, or say something, or repeat something, or do something,

or reach out then checking our motivation matters: “Am I doing this from love?”

If we are going to call ourselves a Church then our language and our currency can only be love. If we are going to call ourselves a Church then we have to accept that the limits we can put on membership and belonging can only be the ones that God himself imposes. Which is to say none.

It sounds exhausting and impossible. And it would be if we were doing all of this on our own. Which we’re not.

Tonight, Jesus is establishing a movement which will change the world though the changed lives of those whose feet have been washed. He is building a selfless family in which the weak and the poor and the little and the voiceless are put first. He is establishing the Church- a group of people whose feet have been washed by God, who are given a new commandment tonight- to love each other as we have first been loved.

Good Friday 2018

Last night and today Jesus is putting in place the things needed to build the Church- that everyone is of equal worth, that we are called to love as we have been loved first. Today, Jesus will add to that recipe a fundamental sense of humility, and then add the catalyst of how we are to relate to each other, not through our blood but through the blood of the cross.

And if you're thinking that this is all quite simple stuff let me ask you this: how well do the institutions and communities you're part of match up to this model? How equal do you think that people in our country feel? How much are the relationships around you awash with loving selflessness? How quick are we to admit that we have got it wrong? Who actually wants to do this when choosing to do what we want is so much more natural?

Certainly the disciples are not excelling in the first test they face in this new creation. Very few people pass the test and most of them are women. Each of the Gospels refers to a number of women who were present, watching, helpless. And beyond that? Only John, the beloved disciple. The other 11 have vanished like the morning mist- Peter has tried and failed, Judas has succeeded and broken his own heart and the other 9 are absent from the scene and absent from the story. It's little surprise that they didn't want the truth of where they were to be recorded for posterity- but sometimes silence says as much.

This new community in which everyone is made welcome, which deals in love, has absolutely failed its first test. Jesus had every right to expect better from the 12 than he got. The community is scattered, hiding under stairwells and cowering in attics, hearts pumping, heads pounding, alert to every whisper and every opening door.

Last night I named two truths at the foundation of the Church- that everyone has equal worth and equal value in the Kingdom of God, and

that we are called to love as we have been loved first. Today I would like to offer two more- that we need to remember Good Friday whenever we become too puffed up with our own importance and power, and here's the catalyst- that we are a family built on our shared need of God.

First then, today is a reminder of our need to be humble. It is God at work in us, not our own ability or wonderfulness, which gives the increase. And if we ever want to look down on someone else, or think that our opinion is worth more, or wonder whether God can really love them when they've done that, then we need to come back to Good Friday. The Church is scattered, shattered, smashed. All of the people who argued about which of them would get the best seat in the Kingdom are cowering behind locked doors or hiding in the hills. Today is what happens when we do it ourselves- like Goliath- and do not put our trust in God, like David. None of us can stand on our own. We are redeemed by the cross, not by our own efforts and not by our own bootstraps. If we stand it is only because Jesus has pulled us out of the mire. If we stand it is because of grace and mercy and love, not because we are, to coin a phrase, worth it. We are called to be David and not Goliath, a Church of the Beatitudes and not of the proudly entitled.

And secondly, what we see today is the first shoots of a new community which is not of competing rivals but of the redeemed. From the cross, Jesus entrusts Mary his mother to John his friend, and his friend to his mother. "And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home." What is remarkable, what unites them, is that it is their relationship with Jesus which brings them into relationship with each other. And it is our relationship with Jesus which brings us into relationship with each other, both within the pierced walls of this building and across the world. If we know our need of God then we will learn to see that quiet resilience in others and we will know that we have nothing to prove to each other, nothing to compete over, nothing to squabble about. Being held in the love of the one who is Love incarnate is all and everything. The rest is vanity.

Today is the day when we know our need of God. The disciples are scattered to the winds. A few courageous women and one faithful disciple stand and watch, helpless to help but unable to be anywhere else but here.

Today is the day when we face reality. Why should we fancy that we could do any better? Why would we think that we'd be braver than Peter and the rest?

The Church of Christ must remember that it is rooted in failure, in fragility, in the despair of the cross. It must act like it. And it must remember that we relate to each other because we are each and all loved by Christ who dies for us.

So let us stand here, at the foot of the cross, and know our eternal need of this moment, of this blessing, of this love. And let us slowly and hesitantly begin to look around, to see in the disparate faces of those around us the first shoots of a new Community rising from the ashes, a community rooted in the love of Christ, where everyone has equal worth and equal weight, and where the language and currency of this new world is Love and only Love, the love that never falters, the love that stands the test, a Kingdom whose fortress is a faithful heart, whose ways are ways of gentleness and whose paths are peace.

Easter Day: 9.30am

Previously in this sermon series...

Jesus prepared a recipe, putting into the mix everything he needed his followers to grasp if they were going to change the world.

Maundy Thursday: he knelt down and washed their feet (even those of Judas) and then gave them bread and wine and told them to do it to remember him.

(Children to put ingredients in, one cup per item)

1) Equality.

Everybody matters to God and you cannot forget that. Think of the person you like most in the world. Think of the person you avoid if you can. Think of yourself. God loves all of those people, you included. He washed the feet of Judas.

2) Love

"I have loved you- you must love other people." It sounds easy- it's not. Loving people means you don't always say you were right, you don't always do what you want, you don't always think of yourself first. You do what you to help, you want them to flourish, you want them grow and be happy, your happiness is tied up with theirs.

Good Friday- Jesus dies on the cross while 11 of the 12 disciples are not there.

3) Humility

Be humble- you aren't perfect- you need to know that you will get things wrong and you will need to think, say sorry and change because what you're doing is not aligned with God, it's not caring for people as God does and it's not being loving enough. The disciples let Jesus down and then they get a second chance.

4) Togetherness/ fellowship

[Catalyst]

Jesus asks John to look after his Mother Mary, and Mary to look after John, and they become like a new family. They are brought together because they both love Jesus.

KEEP STIRRING THE RECIPE!

And then today the stone has rolled away- light has streamed in and light has streamed out into the world. The party popper is pulled. Mary Magdalen rushes to tell the disciples and so the word comes down to us today, and to Alice who is being baptised on this most thrilling of days.

She is being called by name by Jesus who says the same things to her in baptism that he says in Holy Week to his disciples- you are so precious to me that I went to the Cross for you (cross), you will make mistakes and find yourself in need of forgiveness (water) and you need to live humbly knowing that you will not always be right and you need to keep coming back to the root of your faith, and, thirdly, go and love others as you have been loved first (which is the candle).

And the call that Alice receives today is the Easter call which is ours too- to value everyone as God does, to live with humility, accepting that we are not perfect and need constantly to check that our hearts are beating with the heart of God, that we are sent into the world to be as selfless and generous and loving as Jesus is.

Because what Jesus is creating through these vital, last minute instructions is a truly remarkable thing. Put together an absolute belief that everybody matters, that we are called to love as an absolute good, that we have to live with humility because we get things wrong and have the confidence to admit that is a community which is united by love of Jesus, a community which is built to change the world.

Jesus is writing a recipe for the Church (line of figures held up, as if by magic, rep the church) a place where everyone belongs and matters, where love flows back and forth, where we act with humility and where we all relate to each because we all relate to Jesus. It is this community which Jesus creates to change and heal the world, as Easter people. And it is this community of Easter people Alice is joining today, not only as a family she can learn from but a family she can help to shape and direct because she too is in relationship with Jesus.