Holy Week Addresses 2020

John 12.1-11

John 12.20-36

John 13.21-32

John 13.1-17, 31b-35

Thursday – love one another

John 13.1-17, 31b-35

This year we have been journeying through Holy Week in the company of St John’s Gospel. Tonight, we arrive in the Upper Room for the Last Supper.

St John’s gospel is remarkable for many things, not least the poetry of its prose and depth of its theology. But it is also remarkable for one omission in particular. The institution of Holy Communion is entirely absent. In the passion narrative there is no mention of Jesus taking bread and wine, of giving thanks for them, of breaking the bread and pouring the wine and then of sharing these gifts amongst the disciples in remembrance of Him. None of this is in St John’s gospel.

Instead Jesus washes feet.

New Testament scholars address this oddity in a number of ways. Some suggest that John would have presumed that his readers knew the synoptic gospels or parts of them; others draw attention to John 6 which covers the theology of holy communion – Jesus is the bread of life - more than adequately. Others point to the unity of the gospel of John as a whole and especially to the universal and eternal theme of communion that flows through the gospel from its very beginning – In the beginning was the Word...

But…even taking all this into account, John’s focus on the disciples’ feet and not on his legacy appears remarkable.

Or is it?

John’s introductory commentary tells us all we need to know: “having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.”

The Teacher has one last opportunity to convey the core of his purpose to his disciples. Throughout the last three years of his ministry, words alone have repeatedly failed to communicate Jesus’ true identity and message. Time and again, straightforward teaching has had to be dressed up in parable and analogy; even miracles couldn’t persuade all of Jesus’ followers of his truth.

As they lay around at that last meal together, I imagine Jesus desperately trying to think of some way of getting the disciples’ attention.

He turns to drama for impact and does the absolute unthinkable; he reduces himself to the status of a lowly servant and washes his disciples’ feet. How the disciples must have stared at one another in disbelief.

But even worse was to come as Jesus declares: now, I’ve given you an example. Go and do likewise, wash one another’s feet. Go on…a new commandment I give to you….that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. This is the only way people will know that you are my disciples….by the way you love one another.”

As performance benchmarks go, this one is pretty tough. And without intending to sound flippant, this may account why the church sometimes struggles. So often we fail at this most basic of tests, we fail to love one another as we have been loved.

Many churches re-enact the washing of the disciples’ feet as part of their Maundy Thursday services. It is very much a part of my experience of church, along with the drama of stripping the altars and the vigil that follows. Sadly all postponed for another year.

If the prospect of washing one another’s feet unnerves you a little, then perhaps there is even more reason to do it. It is humbling to wash another’s feet and humbling to receive such care too. And yes, it does feel odd the first time.

Washing each other’s feet is not simply a symbolic re-enactment of events long along; for it is an act of love, an act of communion as intimate as any breaking of bread together. Yes, it is shockingly effective at breaking down barriers between people. But it is even more shockingly effective at helping us to enter the story of Christ’s passion and become One with Him. Perhaps John didn’t include the institution of holy communion in his passion narrative simply because he didn’t need to – an act of loving service conveyed everything on its own.

People who know they are loved, love well. People who know they are loved by God, have the potential to love perfectly.

And at the heart of the Christian tradition lies the idea of sacrificial love, unconditional love that gives oneself up for others, epitomised by Christ’s giving of himself for us on the cross.

Often quoted as an example of this is Maximilian Kolbe, the polish friar who famously gave up his life for another in Auschwitz.

We may not be called to such sacrifice. But we are called to countless acts of selfless love analogous to washing one another’s feet.

And every such act is an act of communion – an act of taking the ordinary things of this world, ourselves, giving thanks to God for the blessings of our lives, and then pouring ourselves out so that others too may share in the good news of what Christ has done for us.

Whatever else we learn this Easter, my prayer is that we learn to wash feet. Looking around at our church and at our community, tragedy, in the form of COVID-19 seems to be helping many to do just that.

Amen.