

The Eucharist of the Last Supper

St Luke's, Tutshill, 2022

1 Cor 11:23-26

John 13: 1-17, 31b-35

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Four years ago, on Maundy Thursday 2019 I had the privilege of being invited to preach in this parish. Quite a large congregation gathered, as I remember, at Tidenham, because of course this church was a building site at the time. And I preached a sermon on that occasion which started by asking, 'do you remember the first time you received Holy Communion?' And 'do you remember the last time you received Holy Communion?'

Little did I know then, exactly where we would be just a year from then. Maundy Thursday 2020, Emma and I celebrated Holy Communion in my study in Salisbury, and live-streamed it over Facebook (we hadn't worked out YouTube by then) to this parish. We stripped my little altar, and turned the lights out, and then I cut the feed.

Last year was a bit better. I went to church in Salisbury, where a small socially distanced congregation gathered. We couldn't sing of course, but a small choir offered some music, we did receive the sacrament. No feet were washed, as we were still nervous of close contact. A token watch of about 10 minutes was kept before we all left and the churchwardens sterilised the building ready for the morning.

It is good to have got to this stage of being together again in Holy Week. This night we do meet, as the church has done since

the early centuries of Christianity, to hear the unfolding of this most profound story that begins tonight in the upper room, and into which we immerse ourselves, as we have done for generations, as we follow our Lord out from the upper room into the darkness of Gethsemane, into the trial chamber, along the winding streets of Jerusalem to the green hill far away without the city wall, to the door of his tomb, until just after 9 o'clock on Saturday night we will be startled by fire in the darkness and Easter will dawn again.

In this parish we have been thinking about the 'one another's' in Scripture over this period of Lent. Maybe you have been involved in one of the life groups, or looked at the material on your own. It doesn't matter if you haven't. But we have thought about being at peace with one another. Praying for one another. Being hospitable to one another. Using our gifts for one another, and bearing one another's burdens: being accountable to one another.

And what's really interesting is that there are three more 'one another's' in our readings, and in the themes of this evening. There is so much going on tonight. I could preach a sermon about Holy Communion. How important it is. How much we have missed it, and continue to miss full participation in it. I could preach a sermon about betrayal, and about Judas. I could preach a sermon about the washing of feet, about intimacy and love and service. And I have preached all of those sermons one way or another over the years in one community or another.

But tonight I just want to note those three 'one another's', because actually I think they will gather up most of those other themes, and perhaps give you some hooks upon which you can hang your own keeping of these most sacred three days of the year.

First of all is worth noting that we didn't hear the whole of John chapter 13 this evening. I get increasingly suspicious of readings that have verses missed out of them. I guess tonight that's mostly because it's a long reading anyway, but actually the two missing sections are really important. So maybe if you are staying for the Watch tonight, and there is enough half-light where you are sitting you might just pick up a Bible and read the *whole* of John chapter 13. Or at least some time between now and when you come to church tomorrow, whether that's here in the morning or at 2 o'clock, read the whole chapter.

So at the beginning, and we heard this bit, Jesus washes the feet of the disciples, and he teaches them, "you also ought to wash one another's feet." There's the first 'one another'. Wash one another's feet. That is about service. It is about humility in the proper sense of that word. The family of God is to be humble, and it is to seek to serve the other. What we might not notice because this chunk was snipped out of the middle of the reading, is that Jesus washes Judas's feet. Knowing that Judas is about to betray him, and the missing verses describe the conversation between Jesus and Judas before he goes out into the night to betray Christ, all 24 feet are washed. Not just the feet of the 'nice' people. All of them. And there is a foreshadowing there of the way in which grace works. We do well to remember that we are washed in the blood of the Lamb and we absolutely don't deserve it. But grace just does its thing anyway.

Because we didn't hear the middle bit of the gospel we missed the meal as well, but we heard St Paul's account instead. But again we didn't hear the whole chapter. And elsewhere in that chapter St Paul gives us the second of tonight's 'one another's': "wait for one another" he says. When you come together to break bread don't just start when you feel like it, wait for the

community to assemble. Form a community. Form a congregation. Be deliberate about this. Because you are forming the body of Christ. Brothers and sisters when we gather around the table of the Lord to do this most extraordinary thing, which of course tonight we are remembering very first instance of, we are doing the thing that defines us. We are *remembering*, putting back together, the broken body of Christ, each of us just a tiny part of it, but each fragment just as holy and valuable as the last. Wait for one another. Never devalue this meal. Never forget how extraordinary what we do here tonight really is. Maybe we can feel that slightly more profoundly now than we did before the events of the last two years.

And then, of course, 'love one another'. But again the vital bit is missed out. In that chapter of the gospel there are three more verses, Peter says to Jesus, 'I love you so much that I will follow you wherever you go'. And Jesus says to him, 'well actually Peter, before daybreak tomorrow you will have denied you even know me'.

Loving one another is really important, and it is an obligation upon us to try. But what tonight, and the events of the next three days will remind us of once again, is that our love is not what fixes things. Our love is not what changes the world. Our love is not what brings us home. Because there is a torrent of love, which will pour like blood and water from the side of Christ tomorrow, and which lifts us up and bears us along.

This service tonight ends in darkness and scattering. And that is quite deliberate. It's important theologically, and it's actually also important psychologically. We do not accomplish our salvation. And the Church, and individual Christians get into all sorts of trouble when we forget that. Judas seeks a way to betray Christ for money. Peter denies that even knows him. And the

crowd that we joined in with on Sunday shouting 'hosanna' will, by this time tomorrow, be shouting 'crucify'. So we eat and drink, and then symbolically, because we know that it points to a very real tendency in each of our hearts, we scatter, we step into the darkness again, and we wait for God to come and take us home.

And so the cycle of the year turns again, and we relive these sacred days, and we commit ourselves once again to wash one another's feet, to wait for one another that we might eat together, to love one another just a little bit better. But not because these things buy us our salvation. No rather because they are the response to the Christ who watches us sneak away to do something easier and more lucrative, who knows that we will fail to own him, who has heard the 'crucify' as well as the 'hosanna' in our heart, but whose torrents of love divine all loves excelling are are deep enough, and wide enough, and vast enough to gather us just the same.

Amen.