

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – Maundy Thursday – 9th April 2020

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This is certainly a Maundy Thursday unlike the others. The word 'Maundy' comes from the Latin *mandatum*, a command. It's a reference to the 'new commandment' which, according to the Gospel of John, Jesus gave his followers on the night before his death: to love one another as he had loved them. And on that night he gave them two memorable things.

The first was, and is, highly counter-cultural. He washed their feet. In a place where roads were dusty and journeys made on foot, it was customary for a host to offer water to a guest so that they could wash their feet on arrival. And if the host had slaves, the washing was done by the lowest of the slaves. It was unheard of for hosts to do the washing. Peter reacts instinctively: Jesus should not be doing this. He is their leader. But Jesus insists, explaining to Peter that he cannot form part of the community of his followers unless he accepts this act of love. To learn how to love, we first have to learn how to receive it. Many of us resist this sort of vulnerability, preferring to remain in control. Yet a fact of our humanity is our dependence, on God and on each other, and it is in the mutual interdependence of community that we can best learn how to love others.

Jesus's washing of the disciples' feet is also a foretaste of the humiliation he will suffer on the Cross the next day. The self-emptying of God lies at the heart of the mystery of the Gospel. 'Taking the form of a slave', to use Paul's words in his Letter to the Philippians, includes doing the work of a slave, with towel and basin. This is not love in the form of romantic attachment or sentimental feeling. It is the deliberate and costly giving of oneself for the good of another, who may not even be someone we like. This sort of love involves giving time, attention, effort, and if need be our life itself.

We don't need to look far for examples of this kind of love, especially in the current crisis. All over France and across the world, medical and community staff are putting themselves at risk in order to save lives from the coronavirus. Some have paid the highest price. As we keep the Watch at the end of this service, let us hold on our hearts all who are working so sacrificially - in silent thanksgiving for their courage and dedication, and in prayer for their protection. Tonight they are closest to our Lord in Gethsemane.

The second thing Jesus gave his followers on the night before his death was the institution of the Eucharist. He took the simple elements of bread and wine, blessed them, broke them and poured them, and shared them with his friends. He told them they were his body and blood. And he asked them to do this in remembrance of him. 'Was ever another command so obeyed?', wrote the Benedictine monk Dom Gregory Dix, in *The Shape of the Liturgy*. 'For century after century, ... this action has been done, in every conceivable human circumstance, for every conceivable human need from infancy and before it to extreme old age and after it ... People have found no better thing than this to do for monarchs at their crowning and for criminals going to the scaffold; ... one could fill many pages with the reasons why people have done this, and not tell a hundredth part of them.'

The fourfold action of taking, blessing, breaking and giving is a metaphor for what it means to love. In order to love we must first learn what it is to *be* loved – to be taken and to be blessed. We must also learn what it means to become vulnerable – to allow ourselves to be broken. It is only then that our lives can be truly shared with others.

The reason this is a Maundy Thursday not like the others is because sharing Communion and washing one another's feet – the two liturgical acts that are customarily performed this evening - are prohibited because of social distancing. How, in particular, are we to celebrate the institution of the Eucharist if we cannot receive it?

There are perhaps two extra ways in which we can be nourished by the Eucharist while we can't be present with one another at a service. First, the lockdown is giving us new perspectives on time. In thinking about the Eucharist in lockdown, it is worth recalling that the present tense is not the only one that is significant in this service. The past and the future are involved as well. The future is held out in the promise of eternal life, for which Jesus uses the image of a heavenly

banquet. The Eucharist is a foretaste of that banquet, as we are reminded by the words to the anthem by Mozart which we will hear shortly.

The past is recalled through a double lens. We re-enact Christ's actions at the Last Supper, and the Last Supper itself was a Passover meal recalling the liberation of the Hebrews from slavery. By inviting his followers to remember him in bread and wine, Jesus was harnessing the power of a shared meal that brings the past into the present so that the reassuring power of God's steadfast love is felt now, helping us to face the challenges of our own time. The sense of past and future are just as valid in a Eucharist when we can't be together in the present. We can use these weeks to deepen our understanding of their significance.

If all that sounds a bit academic, there's a second way of approaching the Eucharist in lockdown that involves a simple prayer. Tucked away in a footnote to the prayer book (both the original Book of Common Prayer and our modern Common Worship) is a thing called Spiritual Communion, which the church offers 'in extremity of sickness or any other just impediment'. The church has rediscovered it in lockdown, the current crisis being a 'just impediment' to receiving bread and wine physically.

In the original footnote to the Book of Common Prayer, clergy were instructed to assure those receiving Spiritual Communion that if they had repented of their sins and believed that Christ had died for their redemption, 'earnestly remembering the benefits they had thereby and giving hearty thanks therefor', then they would be 'eating and drinking spiritually the body and blood of our Saviour Christ, profitably to their soul's health, although they did not receive the sacrament with their mouths'.

The weeks of lockdown are reminding us that our encounter with God is not confined to the Eucharist on a Sunday, however precious it may be to us. We encounter God in myriad ways each day through the created order. And while Jesus instructed his friends at the Last Supper to 'do this' in remembrance of him, he also assured them he would be with them always, till the end of time.

So in the prayer of Spiritual Communion which we will make later in the service, may we feel close to Christ and to one another. And may we know God's love, his presence and his peace, today and always.

Amen.