

Maundy Thursday 1 April 2021

St Edmundsbury Cathedral

Sermon by the Right Reverend Martin Seeley

Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich

Luke 22: 24-30

It is very good for us to be gathered – physically, virtually or through those here representing the public ministries across the diocese. I apologise for persisting in calling this a Chrism Eucharist without chrism in sight.

What I hope we can do in the early Autumn when it may be easier to gather is to hold a chrism eucharist with the blessing of oils and anointing for all of us to receive God's grace, healing and renewal.

Now to our Gospel reading. St Luke, like St John, has time for Jesus to speak during the final meal before he was arrested. Mark and Matthew confine themselves to Jesus' declaration that one of the disciples would betray him, and to the institution of the Lord's Supper.

But John as we know has a whole five chapters of Jesus speaking at the meal. Luke has a lot less, but in half a chapter includes both the dispute about greatness and the disciples need for preparedness.

Luke and John's discourses have little in common, but here, in our gospel reading, they touch, on this issue of service. In Luke we hear "The greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader as one who serves...I am among you as one who serves." Echoed in John: "If I your Lord and Teacher have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet." And I want to use both of these to help us today.

We know that this is about power. And Jesus is challenging the very dynamics of power and how we are to live, to exercise, to engage with power, if we are to be his followers. The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them but not so with you.

This is such a hard lesson to follow. Handling power, being aware of its dynamics, and its hidden dynamics that exclude, devalue and demean, takes effort to understand because we are so conditioned in one particular way.

I know that for myself, we all know that. It is, if I may add this comment, it is an appalling tragedy that the government's report on Race and Ethnic Disparities does not seem to know that.

But I believe we have learned a good deal about this, and about what Jesus is speaking about, during this past year. So much has been stripped away. So much of the trappings that protect – and therefore divide – people has been stripped away in the face of the pervasive and deadly Covid virus.

And you and I have experienced that ourselves, we have found trappings, the protections, the guards, the routines, the rituals, the behaviours, have been stripped away.

Let me give you a personal example. At Christmas I came into the vestry here at the cathedral to vest for midnight mass. I put the chasuble on – the same one I've worn numerous times. And it did not fit. Now it was not that I have put a little bit of weight on this past year; it was the opposite – it just felt too big. Of course, it was just the same, and I went ahead and wore it as I will always do.

But the feeling was about something that had happened to me in this year – that somehow the externals mattered so much less, and it was me as a person in relation to the congregation that night, and to you, and to countless others across the county and beyond as persons that really mattered.

Christ calls us in our personhood, in our humanity, to be servants with him, because of who we are not in spite of it, and what I believe has happened to each one of us this past year is we have rediscovered something about our calling to be ourselves as his fellow servants. And we have rediscovered or maybe realised for the first time that being servants is who we are – it is our authentic calling. It is who we are and who we are meant to be.

And so we have all stripped off our outer robes – after all, they no longer fit – and we have taken up the bowl and the towel and served.

We have seen each other bow down to the anxious widower living alone, and listen to his struggles, isolated, alone, cut off from his neighbours

We have seen each other bow down to the young parent who comes each week to the popup shop to feed their children, as they worry if they will ever have enough

We have seen each other bow down to pray with the nurse who has reached the end of her rope after day after day after day caring for the very sick and dying who without her are alone

We have seen each other bow down to tend the tears of the widow whose husband had just died in the hospital, one the exhausted nurse had been selflessly caring for

We have seen each other bow down to be washed with the anger and fear and despair of those who cannot keep going any more, whose way of life is being destroyed, whose business or farm is under threat, whose livelihood is gone

We have seen each other bow down to the teacher working all hours to support and care for her children, to provide in person and online lessons, and then to reach out to the families that cannot cope

We have seen each other bow down with laptop and cameras and cables to sort out how to livestream worship, to provide a living stream of nourishment when there is no bread

We have seen each other bow down at an altar, eager to provide the bread of life for those who are able to be there, sorrowful that for so many, as today, that provision is through the assurance of grace

We have seen each other bow down struggling to make sense of it ourselves, struggling with the restrictions, the limitations, the barriers, and wondering when it will end

We have seen each other bow down in our own grief wracked with tears at the death of our parent, our partner, our child.

We have taken off our outer robe that no longer fits, the constructs of the world's power that do not work. We have picked up the bowl filled with the water of justice and compassion, and the towel of tenderness and kindness, and we have served in our humanity, as children of God, called by Jesus to imitate him, we have served God's children.

And we have seen each other, and Jesus has seen us.

He has seen us. He sees us. Each one of us, right now, he sees us.

And in this moment, in this moment now, in this eucharist, he takes off his outer robe, and takes the bowl of water and the towel and says to you and to me, I am going to wash your feet.

We must let him do this to us, for us, now. There is no point resisting, no point saying this isn't for me, or I'm not ready, or wait till next week, or I've got too much on my mind. And we want this so much.

We let him, now.

We let him bow down and wash us with the water of his love and life; dry us with the towel of courage and hope. And in a little while, let him feed us, with bread, and the grace born by that bread.

He washed the feet and gave blessed bread to those first disciples to show them who they truly were and to give them food for the journey ahead; so he washes our feet now and gives us the bread and its blessing to show us who we truly are and food for the journey with him that lies ahead.

Through the agony and anguish, the anxiety and exhaustion of this year, we give thanks for Jesus' presence with us. We give thanks for all he has shown us. We give thanks for his care for us. For his call on us, and his call on us each day, his call to serve as he serves and to know that that is all, the sum of it, and he will care for us through it all. Thanks be to God.

