

The Most Basic Imperative

John 13:1-20

1 Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. 2 The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper 3 Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, 4 got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. 5 Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. 6 He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" 7 Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." 8 Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." 9 Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" 10 Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." 11 For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."

12 After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? 13 You call me Teacher and Lord — and you are right, for that is what I am. 14 So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. 15 For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. 16 Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. 17 If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. 18 I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But it is to fulfil the scripture, 'The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.' 19 I tell you this now, before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am he. 20 Very truly, I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me."

‘Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.’

(13:1) That is the headline for the climactic evening of the life of Jesus, the evening before he died. His life, his death, and his resurrection are about love. The first time the word love is mentioned in the Gospel of John is when Jesus says, **‘God**

so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him [trusts in him] **may not perish but may have eternal life** [deep, lasting life—on both sides of death].’ (3:16) It is made completely clear, time after time, in wave after wave of dramatic action and teaching, that love is not only at the heart of who Jesus is and what he does; love is at the heart of all reality, at the heart of who God is and what life is about.

We watch the news and it is hard to believe that. But we watch Jesus and we can learn, often very slowly indeed, to trust and understand that how he embodies and lives a life of love, and a death for love, really is the deepest and most important secret we can ever learn. And we need to learn it for the first time—some of you here now may be learning it for the first time this evening: what a joy if that is happening!—and then we need to learn it more and more, day by day, week by week, year after year—for some of you this will be your tenth or thirtieth or sixtieth Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday, and you will know that this reality, the best possible news, is often very surprising, puzzling and mysterious, but also endlessly deep, infinitely rich, amazingly superabundant, and constantly inspiring, challenging, and creative.

What more can we learn this evening?

After I speak, some of us will have our feet washed in order to bring home to all of us what Jesus did. The reading we have had makes clear how important it is to pay attention to this, to learn from it, and to imitate it. No other teaching and example of Jesus is emphasised so much in John’s Gospel.

It is what Jesus decides to do, and to teach about, at this climactic time, what he calls ‘**his hour**’.

It is the first thing he does after we have been told that ‘**he loved them to the end**’, and that he knew that ‘**the Father had given all things into his hands**’—washing feet is what he does with those hands.

Jesus warns the reluctant Peter that this sort of thing is essential if Peter wants to share life with him.

Jesus underlines his own authority as ‘**Teacher and Lord... that is what I am.**’

Next, he gives an explicit and very strong command: ‘**So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.**’

This is then reinforced by saying we are to follow his example: ‘**For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.**’ Following an example does not mean necessarily doing exactly the same thing; it means being imaginative, improvising on what Jesus has done, filling our lives with acts of loving service to each other: that is the deep secret of life together.

There is even a beatitude, a blessing, one of only two beatitudes in John's Gospel: **'If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.'** This is how to have a life that is blessed.

Could anything be more important? And at the heart of it are two fundamental truths, truths so deep and broad and high that we need to stretch ourselves, our hearts, minds and actions, day after day after day, to take them in and let them really be our reality.

What are these two truths?

The first is what the headline says: Jesus has loved us completely, utterly, to the end, to the point of dying for us. We will try to sound some of the depths of that love tomorrow in our three-hour Good Friday service. It is a strange truth that it can be one of the hardest things to take in, that Jesus came simply to give us love, to be our trusted friend. We are utterly loved, now and always. We do not have to do anything to deserve it. It is given freely. Jesus himself is given freely. The crucified and resurrected Jesus is invisibly present as God is present, inviting us to receive his love, the breath of his Spirit.

The second truth is that Jesus wants this gift of a new relationship of trust and love not to be one-sided, but to be utterly mutual. And mutual loving service symbolised by foot-washing is just the beginning.

The Farewell Discourses in chapters 13 to 17 go on to speak of mutual friendship, when Jesus says: **"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you..."** (15:12-14) And what is commanded—perhaps better, invited—is mutual trust and love.

But even that is not all. The summit of this love is reached in the final prayer of Jesus in John 17. There Jesus pours out his ultimate desire, that we might be utterly one in love with him and his Father, and with each other, for the sake of the whole world—and all creation, with the result **'that the love with which you [that is, his Father] have loved me may be in them [that is, us who trust him], and I in them.'**

Try to get your mind, heart, and imagination around that: the very love of God, the love that has created and now saved the world, opening up a new future, is in us and the living Jesus Christ in us.

What we are heading for this evening is not only the foot-washing as a sign of the mutual love and service inspired by Jesus, but also taking part in Holy Communion. The bread and wine received by us will be a sign of utter union in mutual trust and love: 'that we may evermore dwell in him and he in us'.