

“Do this in remembrance of me” is probably the defining text for tonight. Broken bread and wine shared amongst the disciples. Jesus stooping to wash his disciples’ feet. The night before Good Friday. As we gather to remember, mindful perhaps that in this year especially – remembering is almost all that we can do. For this is not our usual Maundy Thursday.

In many churches, this Maundy Thursday celebration of the Eucharist is accompanied by the priest washing the feet of the congregation. The ritual closely follows the version of events in the Last Supper, but recorded only in John’s Gospel. The ritual, like many other ceremonies of the day, is about service: to the poor, one another, the sick and dying. On Maundy Thursday, even before the death is remembered and re-enacted, the first fruits of the Gospel are already in evidence.

Like me tonight, you will be into your third week of lockdown: maintaining social distance at home, in hospital or in a care home, or perhaps even in self-isolation. Aloneness is part of Maundy Thursday night. It is, after all, what Jesus knew in Gethsemane.

Tonight, this evening is about something else: memory and salvation. Tonight is about remembrance. We may fear as you look forward tonight. The darkness of Good Friday is almost upon us, and the Light of the World will be, ritually, and for a brief while, extinguished. Indeed, many people in the present suppose that faced with all of this calamity, things will only get worse. Civilisation will collapse; society unravel; community disintegrate and we turn away from each other: “every man or woman for themselves”.

However, that is not what we are seeing in this global pandemic. We are witnessing something else. The recovery of memory: remembering. Not just recollection, but even now re-membering – putting things back together that should not have been taken apart.
All over the world at the moment, communities have mobilised, and have acted where the state cannot function well, if at all. Aid packages, food parcels, spare and vacant flats for healthcare workers are part of this. People are rediscovering service to their neighbours, communities and those who cannot care for themselves. Creed and greed have been by new patterns of service.

Even now, community drivers, babysitting networks for the children of key workers, new ways of teaching, playing and relaxing are all being born. In one city, a “Mums on the Run” group now jogs to fetch medicines for those isolated at home. Without a hint of irony, they re-christened themselves as the “Drug Runners”.

We have already begun to learn some new ways of living as a result of these challenges. We can re-member that truly charitable heart and a giving attitude is powerful and unstoppable when it is hitched up to serious spiritual and social intelligence. We live in unconventional times right now: the world is turned upside down.

“So this in remembrance of me” takes bread and wine, and shares them; he takes water and a towel, and bathes your dirty, dusty feet. Yours, mine; and Jesus asks us to do this for the world.

Tonight, we may be socially distant from one another. But we are not apart. We may be scattered, but we are one. We are bonded together in faith, hope and love. We are bonded together in an act of recollection and remembering, where we turn back to the Servant King – the One Who Reigns from the Tree – and who bids us to re-member this world of Christ’s, as God would put it back together. In closing, I offer this hopeful and inspiring poem by John O’Donohue:

This is the time to be slow,  
Lie low to the wall  
Until the bitter weather passes.

Try, as best you can, not to let  
The wire brush of doubt  
Scrape from your heart  
All sense of yourself  
And your hesitant light.
If you remain generous,
Time will come good;
And you will find your feet
Again on fresh pastures of promise,
Where the air will be kind
And blushed with beginning

So, may God bless you, and keep you – and all those close to you this Maundy Thursday night. We watch and wait in the darkness that lies before us. But also wait for the dawn to come, and when the Risen Jesus will Easter in us all once again. Amen.