April 2020: Holy Week Reflections
Maundy Thursday
John 13:1-17, 31b-35

The Revd Canon Dr Emma Percy, Honorary Cathedral Chaplain

The wisdom of the world values the rare and exotic, precious metals, gems and exquisite art. The foolishness of God imbues ordinary things, bread and wine with grace, making the mundane extraordinary.

When I administer the host at communion I like to look at the hands held out to receive. I reflect on the difference in age, skin tone, and size. Some are work worn, the calluses obvious, others are beautifully maintained, manicured. Some show signs of the arthritis that is seizing up the joints, painfully restricting movement, some are the young hands of children carefully and respectfully held in the gesture they have been taught. There is something momentous about placing into each set of hands the small wafer, so insignificant and yet so full of God’s love. ‘The body of Christ’ I say placing this sacrament onto part of the body of another, to be eaten, taken into the very bodily being of this person. We have an embodied religion. God in Christ took on our human bodiliness.

One of the most painful aspects of these strange times is the limit on touch and the inability to share the sacrament together. This Holy night we would usually gather to wash feet and share in the blessed bread and wine. In their absence we remember their importance. At the last supper Jesus took simple ordinary gestures and filled them with significance for ever after. The washing of feet was presumably something in ordinary households that you did yourself, an everyday act of making yourself ready for the meal. A few years ago on a trip to India we were hosted by some local colleges in Chennai. We learnt to queue up with all the students to wash our hands before the meal which we ate with our fingers; an everyday practical ritual. In New Testament times, as you reclined to eat, it was polite to wash your feet.

In wealthier houses the task would be done by servants or slaves. When Jesus castigates Simon the Pharisee in Luke’s gospel for his begrudging hospitality he says – you gave me no water to wash my feet. Not just no servant to do it for him but not even the wherewithal for Jesus to do it himself. Then we are told that a woman enters and washes them for him with perfumed oil and her hair. As Jesus readies himself to wash his disciple’s feet does he remember the
woman who washed his?  
At this meal the disciples are faced with the unsettling experience of Jesus moving around the room washing their feet. He is clearly not the appropriate person to be doing this. One can imagine that the room hushed, that the individuals at the dinner were conscious in a heightened way as their feet were touched. When a servant did this it could simply be received as one’s due, a polite way of cleaning the dirt off. When Jesus is kneeling at your feet and washing them, it becomes an intimate act full of significance.

It is easy to understand Peter’s response. He feels the inappropriateness of Jesus taking on such a menial task and feels that he can show his understanding by not participating. Jesus gently explains that this is a refusal to receive from him, a rejection of what is being freely offered. Peter then jumps in with both feet, ‘well wash all of me then’ and again Jesus needs to ask him to focus on what is needed, what is being given is all that is necessary.

We understand Peter’s confusion. We so often struggle in this way, we don’t accept from others because we think we are being humble, only to find that our pride has stopped us from receiving what they wanted to give; that we have met generosity with rejection. Or we confuse some kind of self-abasement with humility, getting so caught up in our own unworthiness that we become of little use to others.

Jesus constantly speaks in stories and signs because they can carry and convey more depth of meaning than a lecture or sermon. Each of the disciples will remember what it felt like to be touched in this way; each will remember the complex mixture of humility, unworthiness, intimacy, honour and generosity that the action stirred up in them. And they will remember that they are told to do likewise and know that they have to ponder on what that means. Not a literal call to wash people’s feet but a calling to serve others in generous ways that make them feel cherished and precious. A willingness to humble themselves that others may feel lifted up. An understanding that human ideas of status need to be challenged within the world of God’s kingdom where Christ the Lord, kneels at his subjects’ feet.

And this symbolic act is a practical one. The feet we assume needed washing. It is at one level messy involving water and dirt. It is also an embodied act - real feet, real water; human bodies touching each other. You can’t wash someone’s feet at a distance you have to touch them.

So, in pondering what it might mean to do likewise, we need to understand that we are called to get involved, to risk mess and intimacy, to be practical, get close to people, to touch and be touched.

It is not, though, an indiscriminate calling to get overly involved. As Jesus said to Peter, ‘it’s just your feet that need washing’. But it is a calling to understand that following Christ is not some cerebral pastime in which we are called to be disciples in our heads and in our own space. It is a call to be disciples in our physical interactions with others, in the spaces and places where we
touch or fail to touch the lives of others, in the ordinary messy practicalities of life.
After washing the disciples’ feet Jesus feeds them. He takes the ordinary staples of the meal, bread and wine, blesses them and shares them. Again, it is an invitation to participate, the disciples need to take what is offered in the spirit it is offered. And again, it is a bodily experience, physical food ingested by human bodies. Like the washing of the feet it involves ordinary actions made extraordinary because of who Jesus is and what his invitation to participate means.
It is given as gift, a gift to bring us into communion with him and with each other. It is a touching gift that requires us to do something with our bodies to reinforce the commitment of our hearts and minds. And, it is a constant reminder and calling to us to take the ordinary every day aspects of our own lives and find out how we can use them in serving God and our neighbour. It is a reminder that God uses what is to hand, and what is offered, to reach out and touch us with his love.
It is a reminder that we need to be humble enough to both receive from God and others and also to give to God and others. And it is a reminder that the Christian life is a calling to a practical life, faith lived out in action. We are to be involved in the world Christ came to save.
To love God with all our body, mind and soul and to show our love to our neighbours in practical, generous, gifting of who we are and what we can do.
The foolishness of God is choosing to speak to us in the everyday, allowing God’s self to be accessible, approachable, touchable, stooping to our level that we may be lifted up into the eternal presence.