Reflection for Maundy Thursday April 17th 2025

Gospel: St John 13

The Gospel Reading that enables us to move seamlessly from the public ministry of Jesus among the people to the more intense expression of that same ministry among his disciples in chapter 13 of St John’s Gospel is the account of *an enacted prophecy* and *an embodied parable* that definitively changes the understanding of The Twelve Disciples in regard to their Master. We, as ministers both lay and ordained, need always to be on our guard regarding ourselves when we read this. Whether we call it clericalism or ministerialism, the allure of being an insider with Jesus Christ cannot do away with the continuing fact that we remain part of the bigger group of people whom the Scriptures regularly call simply: the crowd. As well as there being an unique quality in who we are as well as specialness as being an integral part of what we do and who God makes us to be, we all remain anonymous and wayward, unreliable and problematic. We too are: the crowd.

The event in question is what we call to this day *The Footwashing.* While this probably seems, to people like us who live with it on an annual and a cyclical basis, an obvious title to give to such a deliberate act of humility on the part of Jesus (because it is factually what he is doing), the very fact that its name has stuck and still sticks to this day shows us how out of the ordinary it is. Sometimes, by the church’s making things into liturgy, the very excellence and quality of the re-presentation deadens our sensibilities to the raw impact of the physical activity, partly by its verbalization, partly by its repetition, partly by its beauty, in this case: washing feet. What we hear as Scripture is first and last a scandal. But, as we shall see, not all scandals are bad.

It is a good thing that, in this cathedral church on Maundy Thursday as those who together share specific aspects of Christ’s ministry on today’s earth, we can address and participate in this type of scandal, that we have the opportunity to take time, to address our squeamishness, to hear the pouring and tinkling of water and to let everything sink into our spiritual consciousness through a physical activity happening publicly in real time. And for making this happen, year after year on this day in The Christian Calendar, I want to thank The Dean, you who are in attendance, all the cathedral staff and also all who participate in it, even if, to adapt the words of St Paul, they are more volunteered than volunteering.

St John 13.5: *Then Jesus poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples’ feet, and to wipe them with the towel …* is the passage and the event about which I am talking. It is only slightly less excruciating for the Scripturally and the liturgically squeamish than the story of the woman who pours an alabaster of perfume on Jesus’ feet, feet that are already wet with her tears and deliberately wipes in this fragrant mess with her hair, as recounted in St Luke 7. Sometimes, we simply just have to get on with it and keep with the Godly Programme. Today is one such day for all of us, whether a visitor to this cathedral, a regular worshipper, minister or not. All are most welcome to this feast of the imagination which we call The Footwashing.

I want to catapult you further into this story which you all know well, to St John 13. 34, 35: *I give you a new commandment: love one another; as I have loved you, so you are to love one another. If there is this love among you, then everyone will know that you are my disciples.* An equally valid translation of this would start as follows: *I give you a new mandate: love one another …*We all know what it is today to be designated as A Mandated Person. It is to be the person who is given an entrusted role in relation to Safeguarding. It is a heavy responsibility as it requires each of us to act for the good of those who are vulnerable either as children or as adults, if we sense with good reason that something is seriously amiss in something we have heard or seen about the interaction between two or more people. While some of you may wonder how we got here, it is where we are and will be for the future, in order to safeguard those who access what the Church of Ireland is and what the Church of Ireland does. For all of us, lay and ordained, churchy and not-churchy, Safeguarding is one of those things that rightly is part of the weave of life where we, and everyone else, interact with other people.

Looked at from this perspective, the instruction and the invitation that Jesus gives to the disciples – and everything that we are told in the passage of Scripture between the Footwashing and the New Commandment – from how we now in church life use the word: mandated refers to a particular type of safeguarding of the community. It, therefore, gives to the word: love as used in this context a resonance something like this: …. This is the brutal task of holding fractious, dissident insiders together. This is love in a different register as protection regarding those who are vulnerable alongside protection regarding those who do evil and want to do evil – protecting the latter from themselves. This after all is regulation rather than punishment; and regulation needs to offer scope for redemption. This is not a condemnation. This is a commitment. This is a contract of mutual service. This is a mandate.

What might it look like to be mandated on Maundy Thursday to follow Christ – to Calvary, to Emmaus and to the ends of the earth? If we listen to one part of Scripture, we need to listen to other parts as well. Today offers a new urgency to the invitation to follow. Let me just pick out a few possible lines for following, for us to follow, as we take a new step forward in our journey of discipleship towards the end of Holy Week.

Mandate and the wicked: The first thing to notice is that the wicked are included in the Footwashing. Judas has his feet washed by his Master and by the Master of all of the disciples. There are times when the literary detail of St John’s Gospel is photographic in quality. This, like the calling of the disciples in chapter 1 of St John’s Gospel, is one of those times. The dipping of the bread in the dish is what holds our eye and then the giving of this bread to Judas. If we read the whole chapter in one sweep, we see that it is every bit as much about betrayal as it is about footwashing. In the mind of God, the two together have to work out a way of living alongside one another. Why? It is because without the betrayal of Jesus that *the Son of Man is glorified, and in his God is glorified.* (St John 13.31) In the church and in the world in which we live, most of us would agree that little, if anything has changed, except the faces and the individuals.

Mandate and reciprocal obedience: The second thing is that footwashing and all that it symbolizes cuts both ways between master and servant, between messenger and servant. On the simplest level, it sounds like this: *Then if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.* (St John 13.14)On a more long-lasting level, the picture of relationship between *Teacher and Lord* (St John 13.13) has to do with a profound inversion of status and even in The World of WOKE the status is something genuine, something to be cherished and something to be savoured. The new mandate brings about a revolution in understanding power and authority which, like the mandate and the wicked, has to rub along in daily life. Our shared ministry, our shared witness is not one of honourable withdrawal but one of visible presence. Here there is a deliberate decision on the part of the leader to serve those who are led: *I have set you an example: you are to do as I have done for you.* (St John 13.15) This is not about the cost of discipleship; this is about the cost of leadership. In this case the mandate stretches into the future, into the time of The Holy Spirit. It is for the time to come when he, the master, is not with them, when he is dead and gone and they have to both serve and lead.

Mandate and mission: The third thing is that the relationship between messenger and sender is pivotal: *… whoever receives any messenger of mine receives me; and receiving me, he receives the One who sent me.* (St John 13.20) While we, throughout the church today, have a lot to say about mission as an activity, it is crystal clear, in St John’s Gospel, that mission begins with God the Father and begins again with God the Son. So, once more we are connected with the first chapter of St John’s Gospel. It is a fountain of living water that keeps giving. Mission is not an activity or even a series of activities; mission is the presence of God on earth, the Son sent by the Father and at the point of preparation for The Passion the sending of the messengers by the sender. Again the logic in St John is clear: … *whoever receives any messenger of mine receives me …* (St John 13.20)

If on this Maundy Thursday we can see the word mandate in a new way and in a new light, this time together will have given us a gift to renew our service, to encourage our ministry, to strengthen our love. St John 13 has once again taught us something new: to embrace the wicked, however difficult: to embrace obedience, however ridiculous; to embrace mission, however humiliating. In these three ways, as we go out again into the world of chance and of change to wash and to serve, to lead and to love …