

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

Maundy Thursday: **Love and loving service the risks and challenge**

In a few minutes we shall re-enact our Lord's washing of the disciples' feet.

This is a touching reminder of the message of this day – the day called Maundy Thursday, deriving its name from Christ's 'new commandment' (*mandatum novum*) that, we, his disciples should love one another as he has loved us (John 15.12).

Of course, it wasn't really a new commandment : Jesus had been driving home throughout his ministry the message of love and loving service. '*Love your neighbour as yourself*', he said – and see as your neighbour even the enemy, the alien, the stranger and the despised.

Now Jesus acts out the humility of loving service, kneeling at his disciples' feet, shaming them, and no doubt bringing forth tears, as well as Peter's protest. '*you will never wash my feet...*' (John 13.8). Acts of love sometimes move us more than even the most persuasive words.

But outside that Upper Room, what difference did it make? Elsewhere in the City others celebrated the Passover, oblivious to this humble action going on among a group of undistinguished men; the religious leaders carried on with their task of managing the Passover crowds, whilst at the same time arranging for a surreptitious arrest; Pilate and his troops kept on the

lookout for trouble; Rome carried on its mighty way, both brutalising and civilising its empire at the same time. What passed in the Upper Room seemingly changed nothing except in the hearts and memories of the small band gathered with the Lord.

And yet, we know it changed everything. In the millennia which followed this event hospitals have been founded, schools established, the poor and disabled cherished, and the dying shown compassion and comfort and human rights proclaimed – all because Jesus taught his followers the way of loving service: '*if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one anothers' feet*' (John 13.14).

So we can draw the message that simple acts of love, which seem so small, can have incalculable effects. Loving service is at the heart of the Church's mission.

But we would be mistaken if we supposed that loving service can always be uncontroversial, an aspect of walking in Christ's way which will never invite persecution. We would equally be mistaken in thinking that following Christ the servant has no political implications. Sometimes, I fear, Christians retreat into a Gospel of service as way of avoiding sharp issues. Charity, though undoubtedly good, can be used as a substitute for campaigning ; binding up wounds can be an evasion of the question, what caused these wounds in the first place?

When Jesus washed his disciples' feet he did it in a highly political context: he had recently made the symbolic act of cleansing the Temple – that is, acting out the cleansing of

religion from all that had made it go bad. And he had consistently preached a kingdom – albeit a kingdom not of this world – but one in which the poor and dispossessed have dignity – a change of perception which was and is challenging to the powers of this world. We know that whenever the poor and oppressed grasp hold of their own dignity they shake the foundations of the *status quo*. And the Gospel of the Kingdom that Jesus preached, and lived has had that effect over and over again in history: think of the history of black slaves in America, or black Christians in Apartheid South Africa - grasping their own dignity through the Gospel, until systematic indignity toppled. Christ's way of loving service is about setting people free, not making them into humbly helpless recipients of condescending deeds.

Jesus may not have preached taking up arms against the might of Rome, but his message, once it spread like wildfire, would shake that Empire to its core. It was no chance that he died on a cross – that method of execution considered particularly appropriate for slaves who'd made a bid for freedom - because his message would make so many slaves in the years to follow see themselves as much, much more than their masters' tools. Worthy to be free indeed.

As Jesus knelt before his disciples on the first Maundy Thursday he confronted people – his disciples – whose perception needed cleansing (and their hearts, too); but he was also in the process of confronting a system – indeed systems – which needed cleansing, too.

The way of loving service is a challenging way – not just challenging in asking us to do things we dislike, to deny ourselves, and put our own interests behind those of others. It's also a way which can challenge powerful interests in the world, and invite reprisals – or maybe just ridicule, though that can be painful enough.

We're all been made very aware, over the last few years of organisations like *Medecins sans Frontieres* whose doctors and nurses very often put themselves in the line of fire in order to serve and heal in the many conflict zones of today; we've also heard of medics and humanitarian workers who are native to the place where the conflict is taking place who have been personally targeted. Think of those heroic 'White helmets' who have acted as search and rescue parties in cities of Syria bombed by Assad. They have been subject to disinformation campaigns by the government and the Russians, claiming that they were allied to terrorists. A prominent member is Mohammed Abu Kifah, a civil defence team member who rescued a child from beneath the rubble in Idlib.^{[105][31]} Following his death in an apparent assassination on 12 August 2017, aged 25 years old, Kifah's life was commemorated on [BBC Radio 4's *Last Word*](#).^[106]

These terrible events illustrate how costly loving service can be, and how it can invite persecution. And churches in this country which take in asylum-seeking families, and take up their causes when they're threatened with expulsion – they pay a price, too – as do those who espouse the cause of travellers and gypsies, when nobody else seems to want them in the area.

Loving service of even one elderly or disabled person may seem to be uncontroversial - something to be approved of by everyone; but how often it leads a good neighbour into battles with officialdom on behalf of the person they're trying to help, or confrontations with a family which isn't doing what it should.

Washing people's feet can be a dangerous pursuit. The Lord who took his disciples' feet so tenderly in his hands, to make the point, would soon have those very hands, and his own feet, too, pinned and pierced. Love and loving service are beautiful things as our prayers and hymns attest - but they're also very risky.

So, this is a service which speaks to us of the Lord's love for his followers 'to the end'; it speaks of his feeding us with his own body and blood; it shows us his love. And in doing so, it challenges us to model our lives on his loving service.

There is another service held on Maundy Thursday - usually in the morning. It's the one to which clergy and lay ministers are particularly invited, so that we might reaffirm the commitment to service made at our ordination or licensing; it's also the service at which oil is blessed for use in the life of the churches throughout the year. Three phials of oil are blessed in this service: one for use in anointing the sick and dying, with prayer for healing, wholeness and peace; one for anointing people at their baptism with prayer for their strengthening in the struggle of discipleship against 'sin the world and the devil'; but the third is the one I would like particularly to draw attention to now - it's called the oil of chrism, and

oil we anoint people with to commission them for service. Anyone who has been confirmed in recent years will have had the experience of being anointed with the oil of chrism. We also use it on candidates immediately after they are baptised, with the same meaning of being anointed to serve in the spirit of Christ. But its use isn't restricted to such once-in-a-lifetime occasions: many of us who were in the cathedral this morning for the so-called 'Chrism Service' (or Mass), also went up after the blessing to be anointed individually once more, to be strengthened for continuing service.

But of course, all Christians are ministers, or servants, of the Gospel, all of us want to follow the Christ who serves, even though it's challenging. I'd like us all to share the experience of being anointed with chrism tonight, whilst also feeling for ourselves some of the tenderness of having someone touch you gently as Christ touched his disciples' feet.

In a minute, we shall re-enact the washing of the disciples' feet by Jesus, and those ready and willing to have their feet washed are asked to move to the front row here and remove a shoe and a sock to be ready to have this done. The gesture of having someone kneeling or stooping at one's feet to wash and dry them is very moving - especially when one thinks that it was Jesus who did it first. But I know the footwashing's not for everyone - and the choir, at any rate, will be singing while this happens. So, when all the feet have been washed which people present, I shall send along the rows a small dish with chrism oil blessed this morning in it, and I will anoint the back of one of the hands of the first person on each row,

saying something like this , 'The Lord anoint you with his Spirit, for loving service.' I will then hand the dish on to that person, who can do the same for the person next to them. Please look the other person in the eye as you say this to them, and gently rub the oil into the back of their hand, or make the sign of the cross with a finger dipped in the oil. Chrism oil is infused with essential oils and beautifully scented, so it's a real sign of God's love. Let's give that sign to one another.