

ST EDMUNDSBURY CATHEDRAL - HOLY WEEK 2017

Address given by Canon Angela Tilby

Mass of the Last Supper

Maundy Thursday 2017

Tonight is a night when a sermon could seem redundant. We have heard the Gospel, we will shortly see it acted out. Jesus Christ, on the night of his passion reveals himself as the one who loves to the very end, and whose love is measured out in service. He takes off his outer clothes and kneels to do the routine job of a common slave: washing the tired, aching, dirty feet of his disciples. In doing so, he tells us more eloquently than he could ever have done in words what his life and death are all about.

And we have not forgotten. By we, I mean our whole Christian and half-Christian and post-Christian and not Christian society with all its range of beliefs and commitments. We have not forgotten in that we have not forgotten the meaning of these actions we have just seen, even if we have forgotten Jesus. His legacy is in the respect our society still has for selfless service. We are pleased when otherwise unknown people are recognised in the Honours List. We approve of anonymous donations, hidden benefactors. Think of the appeal of television series like 'Casualty'; playing in, as it does to our belief in the selflessness of those who work for the NHS. Goodwill, kindness, being a Good Samaritan, going the extra mile – those last two phrases straight from the Gospels – are still in common use.

And behind it all the memory of what Jesus did for his disciples with the new commandment, that they love one another. Love, that is the heart of it, love grounded in compassion. From the beginning of his ministry Jesus showed an extraordinary depth of compassion for the helpless and vulnerable. He did not use his powers to keep himself distant and mysterious. He was not superior or condescending. He healed people face to face, person to person. Like a good doctor he asked them what the problem was and he listened to what was said. There was speech and touch and sometimes advice and direction. More than once the sheer volume and intensity of suffering he encountered left him exhausted and depleted. The compassion of Jesus is recognised far beyond the Christian world because it expressed something genuinely new in human history: a recognition that every human person in God's eyes is of infinite value.

Our problem is that we have got used to the idea of selfless service, too used to it, so that it no longer disturbs us. We have forgotten the theology behind it, and so have domesticated it and even tried to make it agreeable. Think of Red Nose day; when we do our bit for others and so feel good about ourselves. Things weren't all that different in the time of Jesus. The great and the good made sure they did public works from time to time, set free a few prisoners, offered entertainment to the masses with free food and drink. But it was mostly to court popularity, to make the people love them. Some of our celebrities and mega rich enter enthusiastically and sincerely into good works, and I am glad of Bill Gates, J.K Rowling and others who pour money into projects that really do make a difference to many people. But such has always been the nature of philanthropy. It is more blessed to give than to receive. Jesus himself was familiar with those who are pre-eminent in society and wield power and influence, and are known as 'benefactors' – friends of the people! But, he said, to his disciples, it shall not be so with you, rather the greatest among you must be the youngest and the leader, like one who serves'. Luke puts those words into the narrative of the Last Supper, the verbal parallel of the foot washing.

In washing the disciples' feet Jesus was not a celebrity stooping to act humbly towards his disciples. There is no hint here of smiling benevolence or gracious condescension. What we see him doing is a job which was normally the task of nonentities. Don't think highly-paid consultant, think poorly-paid care assistant. There is no glamour in washing feet, no heroism. It is drudge-work, often done by women, and invisible. It is clear from the account in John's Gospel that at least one of those whose feet were washed by Jesus was embarrassed. Peter couldn't cope with the master doing the slave's job. He felt humiliated. As though his self-worth depended on Jesus being above him and beyond him. And then when he was more or less ordered by Jesus to let his feet be washed he went over the top, 'Not just by feet but my head and hands...'.

So how do we understand what Jesus did? I think there is a clue in the Gospel itself. According to John, Jesus washes the disciples' feet 'knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God'. The Father had given all things into his hands. Jesus washed the disciples' feet not from a place of either humiliation condescension; but from a place of receptivity. He has been given all things. The Father had given all things into his hands. And here, I think, 'all' means 'all'. Words from Paul's letter to the Colossians come to mind: 'In him' - in Christ - 'all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell'. And I suppose that must mean the universe, the world, history, destiny, the terrible events ahead later tonight and tomorrow. It also includes, of course this water this towel and these feet. Jesus embodies infinite resource, infinite compassion, meeting human need. We are at the place where all the edges meet. Time and eternity. Love and death. Betrayal and forgiveness. 'Through him', says St Paul, 'God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross'.

Jesus here is offering us a window into the heart of God, just at the moment when the view of who God is and what God is doing is just about to be brutally obscured. In the next few hours there will be drama, betrayal and violence. And what does Jesus do? He doesn't plan the great speech for his trial, he doesn't work out a strategy for the survival of his followers, he doesn't interrogate Judas and make him confess his intentions. Instead he performs this small almost invisible act of comfort and hygiene for his disciples. This, he says, is what matters. That is one tiny poignant instance of what God is doing all the time. We live and struggle and suffer and die in utter dependence on God's goodness. And this is not something passive or distant; it is a constant outpouring of God's ecstatic love on the whole creation which does not leave us as we are, but draws us into unity; repentance, forgiveness. The cross which follows the events of tonight is a wholly truthful example and account of the malice of which we are all capable, to which we are all vulnerable. Yet tonight we are pointed to see the cross not only as the starkest evil; but at the same time as the embrace which defeats our worst defeats.

Pointing forwards, the footwashing asks us to see in the cross the love which brought us into the world and the love which will carry us out of this world. It is the love that falls on us from above when we don't notice it and wells up from within when we least expect it. God does not shirk the agony of this night because he does not shirk love, because God alone knows that love is stronger than death, and that Jesus Christ whom he sent into the world is the agent, and maker and restorer of love. This is his victory, this is his triumph. This night, tomorrow and for ever.