

**Sunday, 24<sup>th</sup> April, 2016 – Fr. John Wortley**

“A new commandment I give to you: that you love one another; that you also love one another just as I have loved you.” [Jo 13:34] This the Lord said on the day on which the Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist was instituted, the day on which he shared bread and with his disciples and instructed them to “Do this in remembrance of me.” It was also the day on which the Lord took a towel and washed the feet of his nearest and dearest followers. For a long time, our church did not do *that* in remembrance of him (but then, he did not say we had to.) Let it not however be forgotten that the Archbishops of York continued to wash the feet of the poor on this day well into the 18<sup>th</sup> cent. But now we Anglicans have started doing it again on the Thursday of Holy Week -- on the night when we recall the terrible events in Gethsemane garden. So we have three major actions of the Saviour to commemorate that day.

Yet the name by which we know that day, Maundy Thursday, refers to none of those three things. *Maundy* is a corruption of the Latin word for *commandment*. It refers to something Jesus said after he had washed the disciples’ feet, something of immense importance for all of us who try to live the sort of life he lived. “A new commandment I give unto you,” he said, “that ye love one another. Even as I have loved you, that ye also love one another.” [Jo 13:34] These words echo throughout the NT – e.g. Peter: “Love one another from the heart fervently [ἐκτενω̄ς]” [1 P 1:22] and Paul: “In love of the brethren be tenderly affectionate one to another, in honour preferring one another” *aut* “Let love for our brotherhood breed warmth of mutual affection” *NEB*) [Rom 12:10]

We do not know what word the Lord used when he said we are to love one another. Whoever translated what he said used the most intense of the three Greek words for *love* to express it. That word would mean that we are not merely to love each other in the way we ‘like’ ice cream or ‘are very fond’ of Judy Dench. It means we are to love each other with that natural and intense love we feel for our nearest and dearest. There is no doubt that the Lord loved his disciples in that way then; no doubt that this is how he is loving *us now*. But it is a tough, even an impossible order for us mere mortals -- to love our neighbours like that. Some of us do not even like each other, never mind love. So let us probe a bit and see if something more do-able is being required of us here.

You note that the “new commandment” follows closely upon the foot-washing. You may however not have noted that there is something very odd about the foot-washing. Two things in fact: first, that it takes place *after* the meal, not before it. Secondly, it is no menial or serving-person who does the washing, but the host himself. This foot-washing had a very practical purpose in the Lord’s time. Guests would normally arrive on foot, having travelled un-pathed, dusty, rocky paths, wearing open sandals of no great comfort. It was a simple act of kindness to have the servant wash their feet and maybe put a little oil on their hair too. Today’s equivalent would be – if your guest came by bicycle and was bathed in sweat – to offer him a shower and some fresh clothes. In earlier days when people still lived in tents out in the desert, to pour a little of your valuable water on the aching feet of a new arrival served yet another

purpose. It signalled to him that he had found a safe place to stay; that the rules of hospitality would hold for him, no matter what he might have done or who he was.

By taking up the towel and getting out the bowl *after* they had finished eating Jesus was clearly saying: “You may well look surprised: something quite important is about to happen.” Peter of course prevaricates; he does not like this reversal of the usual order, but the Lord insists: he proceeds to wash the feet of them all, from the greatest to the least. By doing so he gives them all an object-lesson in what it means to *love one another*. Let me try to “unpack” that object lesson for you.

First, the Lord, the *rabbi*, teacher, leader &c., literally takes upon himself the form of a servant. [*cf* Phil 2.7], He performs the office of a menial; of a slave in fact. Has he not said “The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve” [Mt 20:28] and: “I am among you as one who serves”? [Lk 22.27] Here he deliberately and pointedly does just that. If we are to love one another, then we too are to make ourselves very small, not lording it over anybody, but striving to be of service to each other; and that, not the way I think it should be done, but listening to what the other seems to require of us.

Secondly, as you can imagine, to wash the feet of a weary traveller has a most beneficial effect on him/her, relaxing him and readying him for whatever is to come next. So too when we give a person our whole and undivided attention (how rarely we do that!) – we give that person a serious “lift” -- & that in a variety of ways, not least by relaxing him or building up her self-confidence. You may care to think about that one.

Thirdly, by washing the disciples’ feet the Lord was making a serious declaration that he (though he be in the form of a servant) – that he, the Lord, and they were in the host-guest relationship; that they were in receipt of all the benefits of his hospitality. I have already hinted how important this was in former times. Your host was not only one who fed and watered you when you might have expired in the desert; who gave you a safe place to sleep and set you up with provisions for the next stage of your journey. It was also he whose bounden duty it was to protect you and to ward off any force that came to harm or to arrest you – even though it might transpire that you were his enemy’s friend.

Here I think we get quite close to what the Lord was demanding of us when he told us to love one another. We may not be able to offer our fellow Christians that warm affection we have for our spouses, our children and theirs and other close relatives – yes, and for a few favoured friends. We may lack the propensity to do that. But we can and must be prepared to offer to all our brothers and sisters in Christ the full benefits of our hospitality – not least our readiness to care for and to protect them if need arise; but also to give them our whole and undivided attention whenever they might need it.

And this goes for *all* our fellow human beings, including our enemies and those we find it hard to love. We cannot pick and choose. In his famous *Rule* for monks St Benedict writes: “*Every* guest who arrives at the gate is to be received as though he were Christ

himself.”<sup>1</sup> *Every* guest, no exceptions, no exclusions. It is really important to emphasise this these days when some of our fellow Christians are determined to except and exclude those who are attracted to persons of the same sex or gender. The Lord made no exceptions: he said “*Whoever* comes to me I will in no wise cast out” [Jo 6.37] – and that goes just as well for those who love persons of the same sex as for those who love those of the other.

And let me say, in conclusion, that it also goes equally well for the 70 / 80 poor people who come to our church door each Tuesday morning. There are those among us who are here early each Tuesday morning, here to welcome those people in. They are here to receive *our* brothers and sisters in Christ as *our* guests -- on our behalf. There are other persons among us who support that hospitality with gifts of food and money; others still who send clothes and other supplies for our guests. We need more: more workers, more food, more money – so please do not hesitate to volunteer or to give. For in offering those guests our heartfelt hospitality, we are offering it to Christ himself; you remember how he says: “Inasmuch as you did it unto the least of these my brethren, you did it unto me.” [Mt 26:40] “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” *Exclusion* is devilish; *inclusion* is divine.

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<sup>1</sup> 53.1 : Omnes supervenientes hospites tamquam Christus suscipiantur, quia ipse dicturus est: *Hospes fui et suscepistisme*; et omnibus congruus honor exhibeatur, *maxime domesticis fidei et peregrinis*.