

Sermon Maundy Thursday St Swithun's 1 April 2021

May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

'Do you understand what I have done for you? If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. I have set you an example: you are to do as I have done for you.' The immense power of today's Maundy Thursday Gospel lies in the physicality of Jesus literally showing us what living in and living out the love of God look like. When it's presented like that, following Christ seems simple and straightforward: we're to love one another and live out that love through serving others.

And yet the disciples themselves, who spent their waking and sleeping lives with Jesus; who had given up everything to follow him - they repeatedly failed to recognise this love; or to enact it. Like the Kingdom of God, which is characterised by the quality of such love, its nature is elusive, frequently 'near', sometimes glimpsed, but never quite 'captured' or able to be definitively described. Jesus alludes to the Kingdom as the pearl of great price; like the woman who rejoices over the finding of a coin believed lost; or the shepherd who goes in search of the one missing sheep among a hundred; the father who, the instant he sees him far away in the horizon, rushes out to embrace the son he believed would never return to him. That Kingdom of God is close at hand when Zacchaeus the corrupt tax collector, drawn to Jesus, climbs a tree in order to see him better. We can discern in Jesus' asking to dine at his house the recognition that Zacchaeus yearns for. And in that knowledge that he is unconditionally loved and accepted, the Kingdom can be seen at work.

We, though, have the benefit of hindsight; we have the Gospels and two thousand years' of church tradition and teaching. In the immediacy of the

present, if we're not attentive, the still small voice; 'the whisper of God', is easily drowned out by the clamour of voices competing for truth; insisting that 'this is how things are done'. The crowd do not approve of Jesus' choice of Zacchaeus' hospitality. 'At this, there was a general murmur of disapproval. He has gone in to be the guest of a sinner.' The disciples try to send away children who are brought to Jesus. He tells them very forcefully that the very nature of childlike spirituality is the gift that allows faith. And there seems to be no one blueprint - no magic formula - for predicting what the Kingdom being near will look like; the completeness and perfection of love reveals itself in as many ways as there are individuals and circumstances.

Even though we approach the Gospels from a very different perspective from that of Jesus' contemporaries, the unexpectedness of where God's love and Kingdom are present has the power to catch us unaware; to take us by surprise. Jesus frequently tells his followers that he has come for the poor, the marginalised, the sick, to set the oppressed free, so far so straightforward, it would seem. Yet, when Judas criticises Mary of Bethany for the profligate gift of the expensive oil she anoints Jesus with shortly before his capture and crucifixion – it could have been sold and the money given to the poor - he commends what she has done, for 'The poor are always with you, but you will not always have me'. The quality of love, not some sort of calculation to maximise giving, is the measure of true relationship. And so with the lost sheep: the complete care of the shepherd for the one missing cannot be diluted or reduced by the existence of the other ninety-nine. At that moment, all that matters is to empty himself for the love of the one.

This is not the Kingdom of the world; not the way our society seeks to order itself. God's Kingdom speaks of another existence, where pure love is the only currency. Jesus is not concerned with ends and means and bringing the

greatest benefit to the greatest number; only of mending and healing the person before him. In our imperfect, flawed world, how can we in practice live entirely like this; leaving the ninety nine for the one; giving away all our possessions; having no thought for the future? But acknowledging the impossibility of doing so paradoxically goes hand in hand with also acknowledging the cost of not doing so.

The many restrictions arising from the Coronavirus pandemic were designed to save as many lives as possible and so to minimise suffering. Many have surely been saved; and the restrictions are now more compassionate than last Spring. But what of those who have suffered as a by-product of the policy decreed to be the most appropriate? How do we show the love of Christ - the Christ who expends all for the one sheep; for the lost son; for the woman washing his feet with her tears - how do we minister to the woman prevented from attending her beloved husband's funeral; the man dying alone in hospital; the teenager driven to contemplate suicide through isolation; the distraught parent unable to see their adult daughter with learning difficulties in residential care - when we always knew and accepted that these were the consequences of the policy? What do we say to these men, women and children when we claim to speak in the name of Christ; of the church - of love?

I do not think there is anything that can be said, other than to confess to the reality and truth of their suffering; never to deny the preciousness of what has been lost; and how deeply we have failed and fail to 'love one another as I have loved you'. 'Be perfect as I am' Jesus says. In coming to the ever-deeper realisation of how far short of God's love we fall in our flawed existence; in the circumstances we inhabit in our broken world - where we can only glimpse but not fully grasp how to live in God's Kingdom - in that knowledge, we may simultaneously realise the depth of our need for God; of God's love. And in

doing so, in longing to live in that love, we may move a little closer towards life in Christ.

How much of the fullness of God's love for God's creation can any of us begin to grasp in this life? Yet God's Kingdom, of a different quality to that of our world, also possesses a resonance, a familiarity, a rightness. We are so far from that Kingdom, but we have Jesus's example, supremely shown in today's Gospel, with to seek and occasionally glimpse it. Only through the totality of Jesus' self-giving through crucifixion and death, can the fullest revelation of God's love be made known, a God who in Paul's words, 'made himself nothing, assuming the form of a slave', and who shared our human lot 'and was obedient, even to the point of death, death on a cross.' Yet in seeking to live out, however imperfectly, that deceptively simple commandment to love one another as God loves us, can we trust in the everlasting arms of the God for whom nothing precious is ever lost and in whom nothing broken cannot be mended - and allow Him to dwell in us, and rest in the faith and hope that it is enough? Amen.