

Sermon on Maundy Thursday, 17 April 2025 by Melanie Seward, Lay Reader

Readings: 1 Corinthians 11.23- 26 and John 13. 1-17, 31b-35



What is love and what does it mean to love?

The last hours Jesus and the disciples have together before his arrest are very precious. Having entered Jerusalem and been lauded as Messiah, Jesus has continued to engage and challenge religious leaders of the time. He must now be aware that his enemies are closing in and about to pounce. From Jesus' point of view, what can he give the disciples? From the viewpoint of the disciples, what will they take from this? In the end, it all comes down to love.

What is love and what does it mean to love?

In today's world, we are given conflicting messages. 'Loving' can

be construed as concentrating on ourselves to the detriment of others, whether it is our country, neighbours or family: Britain first, my neighbourhood, charity at home. Yet we are exhorted to encourage a strong family life, look out for the vulnerable, support charities and build relationships with other countries. In the media, Love **might** be an attraction in an episode of *'Married at First Sight'*, or it is seen in the partner who is left behind to campaign and hope for the release of a hostage held for years.

As we approach the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, the nature of God's love becomes very clear. In the Synoptic Gospels (we have the Last Supper, but John's Gospel does not give an account of the Last Supper - in its place is foot washing), it is an act that demonstrates God's love.

God's love is welcoming - Jesus performs an act that was traditionally done as part of the welcome of a guest into a residence or home and it both refreshes those who have arrived and makes them more comfortable to meet the host. It says, 'Welcome into a relationship of faith with me'.

Again, the nature of God's love is to break down and break through barriers. The role of the foot washer was that of a slave, the lowest servant or the youngest of the family, yet Jesus is 'Rabbi' or 'Master'; he is 'Teacher' and 'Lord'. The Lord takes on the lowliest task for his disciples and he tells them that this is the model of service that they must have for each other. Status does not define relationships in the community of those who follow Jesus and love God.

The beginning of this passage, as well as verse 11, leads us to believe that Jesus (who would have known all his disciples

intimately) already knew that Judas would betray him - he will walk away from his relationship with Jesus. We note that Jesus washes the feet of all the disciples. Judas is not exempt.

Remember God's love reaches out to those who have doubts, who are undergoing a period of weakness, to those who are crossing into darkness rather than walking towards the Light.

Jesus will **love** the disciples to the end - the completion of his earthly ministry when he dies upon the cross for the disciples and for the whole of humanity. Again, he dies for the Head of State and the Slave, for the criminal on the cross and for those who love him standing before the cross looking up, those who follow and for those who do not. He pays the ultimate price - execution by crucifixion. This love has no bounds. It is a love that will last through everything. Now that is love.

Jesus washes the feet of all the disciples. And then what does he say? 'So, if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet'. Jesus gives them a new commandment – I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another' And he includes the phrase, 'By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.' (verses 34-35)

This commandment is not just 'love each other'. It is new because the expression of it should reflect the love that Jesus both reveals and gave to us. Furthermore, our ability to walk through life in this way will need to be sustained by the same divine love.

So, what might this look like here in Hertford?

Well, we get a big clue in our first reading from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. He is writing to a congregation because they have lost their way. People are competing on holiness, forming groups who follow this teaching or listen to that person, and who believe they are somehow better.

Paul is deeply saddened and even shocked by how they are practicing the Lord's Supper, which then involved a gathering for a meal. Far from reflecting the divine overflowing, abundant love that through Jesus is available to all, far from Christ's model of service and his completion of a ministry to break down barriers, the meals were being shaped by the cultural norms around them. The impression is of individuals sitting in certain spots round the table; some bringing their wife, children and slaves along (who had to sit elsewhere; later, those considered of a lower status came to eat what was left!).

For Paul, the moment of Jesus' death and the celebration of it, unifies us all. He felt the behaviour of the Christians at Corinth was an offence to the death of Jesus. Strong words. I wonder, what might our offence be today? Who do we sit with/ talk to/ walk with/ reach out to/ serve and so love?

To quote one commentary: **'It is the mandate of the church to become a community of love ... who invest in one another because Christ invested in them, who exhibit love not based on the mutuality and attractiveness of its members, but on the model of Christ, who washed the feet of everyone (including Judas).'**

Quotation from p.387 Burge's NIV Application Commentary