

Sermon preached at St Andrew's, Soham on Maundy Thursday 2017
John 13:1-7, 31b-35 and 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

All the room was hushed and still,
and when the bowl was filled
He stooped to wash their feet,
and when it was complete
He said: This is what I'm asking you to do;
this is why I'm kneeling here beside you.
This is what I want My church to be;
this is what I want the world to see:
Who it is you follow.
Love each other, one another,
love each other in the way that I have loved you;
walk together, and whatever comes
love each other in the way that I have loved you.
(Graham Kendrick "Love each other" verse 1 and chorus)

Graham Kendrick's retelling of the story we have just heard in our gospel reading.

Feet are not the easiest things to wash – not when they belong to someone else, anyway! In my early working life I was a carer, and washed many feet. The thing about feet is that they may be ticklish, or smelly, or funny shapes, and they are quite awkward because you have to get in between the toes, and then dry them thoroughly there too, and some toes are squashed together, and some don't seem to move, and some are full of arthritis, and you find yourself being very cautious not to hurt someone and yet at the same time needing to ensure that they are washed thoroughly... And as well as all of that, kneeling at someone's feet puts you in a very vulnerable position. Someone could kick out, either out of aggression or as a reflex, far faster than you can get out of the way. So foot-washing can be tricky, dangerous, personal. It requires attention to detail, stamina, and a great deal of vulnerability.

It is also down-to-earth and practical. For those who can't wash their own feet, to have someone take that kind of care makes such a difference not only to how the feet feel, but to the rest of the body too. So much easier to have stimulating conversation, enjoy a good meal, or to meditate on things of God, when one's feet are clean! It's perhaps hard for us to appreciate unless we have been in that situation ourselves, but for Jesus and His contemporaries in the dry, dusty land in which they lived, everyone would have known of the value of having their feet washed, and it was the role of the servant to do just that.

So, Jesus washed His disciples' feet. And though we didn't hear it in this evening's reading, He told His disciples – His apprentices – them and us – to do the same, to follow the pattern learnt from Him. Not just to wash each other's feet but the wider pattern it symbolised, of being practical, down-to-earth and vulnerable, attending to each other's needs. Being servants of one another. Loving each other, in the way that Jesus has modelled. And "By this", He says, "everyone will know that you are my disciples". Loving each other, in a practical, down-to-earth, vulnerable way, is the way that Jesus will be recognised in us.

In what ways, I wonder, are our dealings with each other characterised by love?

When we meet, as congregation, as PCC, as Ministry Team, as groups chatting over coffee after the service, as 2s or 3s meeting up outside of church activities, to what extent are our conversations and actions characterised by love? Love that entails vulnerability?

What are the things, I wonder, that get in the way of us allowing ourselves to be vulnerable with each other? As I said here on Ash Wednesday, Pope Francis describes sin as a wound: the one who sins is wounded, those who are sinned against are wounded, and as a body we are wounded, when we fail to live as a community of people who are loved by God, loving each other and ourselves as God loves us. We are wounded when what we think, decide, do or don't do, is shaped by too little love. So what are the wounds that need to be healed in our community, our "body of Christ", so that we can trust each other enough to be vulnerable in our love?

What might we need to confess, in order for that healing to take place?

Of course, it doesn't stop at Jesus washing feet. He's there to celebrate the Passover with His friends. The Passover is the Jewish freedom festival. The Passover meal, through its symbolic foods, words and actions, tells the story of God setting His people free from slavery by miraculous acts and demonstrations of power over a thousand years previously. For those participating, this was not just the remembering of a historical event; they were celebrating as if it had happened to them, bringing the past into the present and giving hope for the future.

Now, though, Jesus gives the meal a new, additional, significance. It becomes not only a celebration of freedom, but a sign of His love: love which doesn't stop at the washing of feet, but which continues to the death – His death, as His body is broken and His life is poured out for all. Love which is not about warm feelings, but about grit, about standing firm, about holding fast to truth, about following where God leads even when the destination is unknown, or costly. Love which entails not only vulnerability, but brokenness.

"Love one another," said Jesus. "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

When, I wonder, do we love to the point of being broken?

In a moment there will be the opportunity, for those who wish to take it, to have your feet washed by Eleanor, as she reminds us in a visible, physical way of the practical, vulnerable love to which we are called. A little later there will be the opportunity to gather here around the table and share in the body that is broken for us and the blood that is shed for us – a visible, physical reminder of the brokenness to which we are called. For a moment, though, just ponder. Ponder the love to which we are called. And ponder the love which calls us and which first loved us.

Let the room be hushed and still.

Let us go to where He kneels

and join Him as He serves,

and learn His ways of love:

He said, this is what I'm asking you to do;

this is why I'm kneeling here beside you.

This is what I want My church to be;

this is what I want the world to see:

Who it is you follow.

Love each other, one another,

love each other in the way that I have loved you;

walk together, and whatever comes

love each other in the way that I have loved you.

(Graham Kendrick "Love each other" verse 2 and chorus)