

SERMON – MAUNDY THURSDAY

John 13.1-17, 31-35

ALL SAINTS CHURCH, WITLEY

20 MARCH 2008

I received one of those emails last weekend that get sent to a whole group of people and then passed on to another group. Frankly it appalled me.

On two counts, one the sentiments within it and two the fact that some of my friends, my Christian friends, could agree with such sentiments.

Here we are on Maundy Thursday when Jesus shows us in so many ways what it means to love one another – and how difficult that can be - and I get an email completely negating all this. That email made me very sad and very angry when I first read it. It was awful.

Let me tell you a little of what it said. It's supposed to be a letter written by a housewife in Canada to her local paper. First of all it was headed 'I don't care', which summed up the contents very well. It carried on with racist statements about the events of 9/11. It listed various comments about the Koran and Osama Bin Laden. Then it listed atrocious events that have happened in the past few years, ones that no one would condone, things like beheadings and other torture, but each one finished with the statement 'I don't care'.

It went on to get sarcastic about spending money on providing Islamic prisoners with basic things like a Koran and a prayer mat. Throughout, it was asking that the perpetrators of terrorist acts own up and repent, but the overall theme of the letter is that there is no care for them at all and that any that are caught should just be locked up and ignored. It finished with an exhortation to pass on the email so that eventually it may have an effect – although what effect it would have, I'm not sure.

It ends with one of the most offensive parts, as far as I am concerned, with a comment that only soldiers and Jesus have ever died for us, then, it says, one died for your soul and one for your freedom.

I am sad that Jesus's death and resurrection can be put alongside someone being killed in war - and then dismissed by saying he died for your soul. That is to belittle the centre of our beliefs and to reduce what Jesus did to a simple human act, instead of a huge world changing event, bringing more freedom than any other single event.

It overlooks the fact that Jesus told us to love our enemies, that we should overcome evil with good and that every person is of value to God.

I found the whole thing very offensive and very sad. Offensive in content and sad because some of my friends might agree with it.

Today of all days we are in the midst of everything that our faith means to us. Jesus the servant, Jesus the sacrifice, Jesus who suffered the ultimate evil, Jesus who proved to us that evil will never prevail.

Love your neighbour as yourself, he said and when asked 'who is my neighbour', Jesus was very quick to tell us that its not just the person we get on well with, who happens to share our views.

We start this evening with a celebration of holy communion in remembrance of its institution and in thanksgiving that we can join in this intimate and special way with Jesus's salvation, but the evening ends with the disarray of Jesus's arrest and trial. The desolation and loneliness of the cross. Tonight is like no other in the Christian year,

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tonight was like no other in the life of Jesus and his disciples. Tonight is a practical demonstration of all that Christ taught throughout his ministry.

Jesus started the meal in a very strange way – he washed his disciples feet. They must have been completely overwhelmed and amazed, no one did that, except the lowliest servant, and Jesus was their leader. He did it when they were least expecting it, at the beginning of the meal, not when they entered the house as they would have expected.

To quote from John's gospel, 'He got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing and wrapped a towel round his waist. After that he poured water in a basin and began to wash his disciples feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped round him.'

What he did was deliver a lecture about what his ministry meant, without saying a word.

He got up from the table, knowing what he was going to do and knowing that it would upset some people by doing it, but nevertheless he got up and did it. Sometimes we know what we have to do, but we are reluctant to get up and make a start.

He took off his outer clothing, a practical thing to do so it wouldn't get soiled and wet, but a symbolic thing as well. If we are going to be effective in helping others, effective in doing God's work, we need to take off the veneer that we hide behind. God knows what we are really like, but so often we hide behind an outer garment of what we think we want others to see, instead of just being ourselves. If we are living a pretence or trying to live up to a false image, we will disable our ability to go where God wants us to. We may be so hung up on our own image, that we will be unable to see beyond that image. So we need to strip off that false layer and be ourselves.

Jesus wrapped a towel round his waist and then he poured water into a bowl. In other words he made preparation for what he was going to do. That may sound like stating the obvious, but when we are going to help someone – to serve them, we need to prepare ourselves carefully. That means taking time to plan and that might mean giving up some of the things we want to do for ourselves. We have to have the right equipment and the best way to equip ourselves is to pray about it.

Having done all that we have to do as Jesus did, the sentence finishes with the words, 'he began to wash their feet.' We have to make that first move to carry out the task. None of that involves the words 'I don't care' for the lives of those around us or for those we never see.

Maundy means 'command' and Jesus commanded us to love one another. He didn't give us rules and tell us what to do in a bossy way. Jesus doesn't just guide us with laws; he does not just show us the way; he is the way, the truth, and the life.

- Loving like Jesus, means serving others, ministering to them however we are able, with whatever abilities we've been given.
- Loving like Jesus means taking time from our busy lives for ministry: maybe not washing feet, but maybe washing altar linens, or perhaps preparing food for a social event, clearing the churchyard, making hospital visits, spending time with friends who are lonely. It might mean editing the magazine, singing in the choir, giving a lift to someone who can no longer drive – the possibilities are endless

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- Loving like Jesus means giving up the image of ourselves as being powerful or important in favour of sharing Jesus's unconditional love with someone else.

Jesus asks us to love one another as he loves us, to minister to each other and our neighbours. So how can we love those we will never know or even see?

- Loving them like Jesus would mean no indulging in the sort of talk like I received in that email. More than that, it means speaking out against such talk.
- Loving like Jesus means being careful in what we buy - always opting for fairly traded goods when they're available. Being mindful of how far food has travelled and where it comes from is a way that collectively we can make a difference to people in real need.
- Loving like Jesus means supporting those who are able to work directly with the disadvantaged and trying to change attitudes that want to write off certain groups of people because of the actions of a few of them.

Jesus said serve one another, immediately that does away with any thought of power or hierarchy or any system that ranks people in a pecking order. Serve one another means that we all have something to give, but equally we are all in need. When we recognise each others needs and are able to accept the we are both givers and receivers then we move a little closer to what Jesus meant when he said

'I am doing this to serve you.' In this Eucharist as we share Christ's broken body and drink his blood, let us also be washed by his love and allow ourselves to be washed clean and to be part of that broken body that is His body on earth.

There is a children's song that says 'love is nothing until you give it away' -- how true that is. Those who know the love of God will be burning to share that love and it will multiply rapidly. Faster even than those emails which go round the world in minutes.

It would be a tragedy if we never experienced the love of God, it would be a bigger tragedy if we received that love and never shared it in word and deed with others.

Amen