

Maundy Thursday 2017.

The Benefice Service, Morcott Church.

'A new commandment' John 13. 34.

An Express Train

The Gospel accounts of the life of Jesus are like an express train; they only stop at principal stations but in Holy Week – the last week of his early life – the trains progress slowly, like the train from Birmingham to Stansted. They stop at every lamppost; they explore every detail. St. John's Gospel is even more analytical. He is like the Fat Controller. If the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) stop at every station, John – back in the station-master's office - analyses the events and chooses just a few for his Annual Report to the Company.

In our gospel tonight, he concentrates on humble service: the foot-washing. None of the other gospels record it. They concentrate, rightly, on the Institution of the Eucharist but John drills down into the bedrock of our discipleship: service.

The Maundy, The New Commandment.

I hope you will excuse me if I recount to you an episode in my former life: The Presentation of the Royal Maundy. The Queen goes every Maundy Thursday to a cathedral in order to present tokens of money to selected pensioners. We know that. It is the back story which is even more instructive. The Queen will do nothing else that day apart from The Maundy Service. The Palace resists every other invitation because this service carries so much importance in the spiritual life of the monarch. It is the only time that The Queen goes out to her people to serve them. She will know – as her forbears knew and as every politician soon learns – that it is service not posturing which earns our respect. It is that New Commandment - that they must love one another as he has loved them - which Jesus gives to his disciples; that New Commandment – *the novum mandatum* – which gives its name to this service.

So Jesus stoops down and washes the feet of his disciples. We know how even these disciples scrap about which of them is the more important so Jesus stoops down and washes their feet. He becomes their slave, the lowest of the low in biblical society. In so doing, he reverses the roles of society to fit the axioms of the kingdom of God. It is frightening to realize that, in the governing Statutes of a Cathedral, the only precise bit of legislation – spelt out in minute detail – is the order of precedence in processions: when the bishop goes after the dean and who goes before the archdeacons. It puts an end to the argument about precedence. Yes, that is the level to which even enlightened humanity stoops sometimes in its craving for recognition.

Foot-washing was important amid the dusty streets of Jerusalem but Jesus gives it a further meaning. He tells Peter - who objects to having his feet washed by his master – that Peter will not be part of him if he refuses. Yes, even after our baptism we sin, we get things wrong, but if we are prepared to allow Jesus to wash away those sins then we can continue along the way together. Sometimes, we just have to sit or kneel or implore that God will act on our behalf as nothing else will do. But we are not good at sitting, waiting upon his gentle service.

Service today.

The streets of Morcott are not dusty so how is this 1st century symbol of humble service relevant to us today?

I wear a cincture belt around my cassock. It resembles a towel and reminds me, each time I put it on, that I am ordained to serve. These symbols challenge us, motivate us and sometimes overpower us. When Rowan Williams was appointed archbishop, 'The Times' carried a front-page picture of him washing feet on Maundy Thursday in Canterbury Cathedral. It was a symbol that challenged society at the start of the 21st century. Which of us was not touched by that photograph on the 3 year old Syrian refugee whose body was washed up on a Turkish beach in 2015?

It is sacrificial service – concern which really costs – that Jesus points to as he washes these feet and looks towards his crucifixion on the next day. Sometimes crucifixion is not too strong a term to describe some service which comes to our notice. Think of Mother Theresa serving those who found themselves in the gutters of Calcutta; or Eric Liddle, international rugby player and Olympic athlete who spent his last days in a missionary internment camp cleaning out the toilets with his bare hands to assist his colleagues and brilliantly illustrated by Duncan Hamilton in his recent biography of Liddle.

Think if you will of the unseen lovers of elderly spouses in our villages, pouring out their lives in silent adoration and service. Always, family life has its cost. Or those who work through the silent hours of the night preparing, planning, praying that we might enjoy security or justice or the best education. I continue to learn - as a dad - so much about the sacrificial love of a mother towards her children.

These acts of humble service do not seek glory but if you want to see the glory of God, says Archbishop Michael Ramsey, then look at Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. It is the glory of a God who humbles himself. It is to him that we must turn tonight and during this Easter festival.

Amen.