

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite Maundy Thursday
2011: **Love and loving service the risks and challenge**
+

In a few minutes we shall re-enact our Lord's washing of the disciples' feet.

This is a touching reminder of the message of this day – the day called Maundy Thursday, deriving its name from Christ's 'new commandment' (*mandatum novum*) that, we, his disciples should love one another as he has loved us (John 15.12).

Of course, it wasn't really a new commandment : Jesus had been driving home throughout his ministry the message of love and loving service. '*Love your neighbour as yourself*', he said – and see as your neighbour even the enemy, the alien, the stranger and the despised.

Now Jesus acts out the humility of loving service, kneeling at his disciples' feet, shaming them, and no doubt bringing forth tears, as well as Peter's protest. '*you will never wash my feet...*' (John 13.8). Acts of love sometimes move us more than even the most persuasive teaching.

But outside that Upper Room, what difference did it make? Elsewhere in the City others celebrated the Passover, oblivious to this humble action going on among a group of undistinguished men; the religious leaders carried on with their task of managing the Passover crowds, whilst at the same time arranging for a surreptitious arrest; Pilate and his troops kept on the lookout for trouble; Rome carried on its mighty way, both

brutalising and civilising its empire at the same time. What passed in the Upper Room seemingly changed nothing except in the hearts and memories of the small band gathered with the Lord.

And yet, we know it changed everything. In the millennia which followed this event hospitals have been founded, schools established, the poor and disabled cherished, and the dying shown compassion and comfort and human rights proclaimed – all because Jesus taught his followers the way of loving service: '*if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one anothers' feet*' (John 13.14).

So we can draw the message that simple acts of love, which seem so small, can have incalculable effects. Loving service is at the heart of the Church's mission.

But we would be mistaken if we supposed that loving service can always be uncontroversial, an aspect of walking in Christ's way which will never invite persecution. We would equally be mistaken in thinking that following Christ the servant has no political implications. Sometimes, I fear, Christians retreat into a Gospel of service as way of avoiding sharp issues. Charity, though undoubtedly good, can be used as a substitute for campaigning ; binding up wounds can be an evasion of the question, what caused these wounds in the first place?

When Jesus washed his disciples' feet he did it in a highly political context: he had recently made the symbolic act of cleansing the Temple – that is, acting out the cleansing of religion from all that had made it go bad. And he had

consistently preached a kingdom – albeit a kingdom not of this world – but one in which the poor and dispossessed have dignity – a change of perception which was and is challenging to the powers of this world. We know that whenever the poor and oppressed grasp hold of their own dignity they shake the foundations of the *status quo*. And the Gospel of the Kingdom that Jesus preached, and lived has had that effect over and over again in history: think of the history of black slaves in America, or black Christians in Apartheid South Africa - grasping their own dignity through the Gospel, until systematic indignity toppled. Christ's way of loving service is about setting people free, not making them into humbly helpless recipients of condescending deeds.

Jesus may not have preached taking up arms against the might of Rome, but his message, once it spread like wildfire, would shake that Empire to its core. It was no chance that he died on a cross – that method of execution considered particularly appropriate for slaves who'd made a bid for freedom - because his message would make so many slaves in the years to follow see themselves as much, much more than their masters' tools. Worthy to be free indeed.

As Jesus knelt before his disciples on the first Maundy Thursday he confronted people – his disciples – whose doors of perception needed cleansing (and their hearts, too); but he was also in the process of confronting a system – indeed systems – which needed cleansing, too.

The way of loving service is a challenging way – not just challenging in asking us to do things we dislike, to deny

ourselves, and put our own interests behind those of others. It's also a way which can challenge powerful interests in the world, and invite reprisals – or maybe just ridicule, though that can be painful enough.

We're all aware, I'm sure, of the doctors and nurses treating victims under fire in Misrata, and the fear and agony they live with. Some of you may also have been reading, like me, of the doctors and medical staff in Bahrain who are being arrested and probably even now tortured, for their work in the hospitals there, treating protestors, because treating people is just what doctors do. These terrible events illustrate how costly loving service can be, and how it can invite terrible persecution. And churches in this country which take in asylum-seeking families, and take up their causes when they're threatened with expulsion – they pay a price, too – as do those who espouse the cause of travellers and gypsies, when nobody else seems to want them in the area.

Loving service of even one elderly or disabled person may seem to be uncontroversial - something to be approved of by everyone; but how often it leads a good neighbour into battles with officialdom on behalf of the person they're trying to help, or confrontations with a family which isn't doing what it should.

Washing people's feet can be a dangerous pursuit. The Lord who took his disciples' feet so tenderly in his hands, to make the point, would soon have those very hands, and his own feet, too, pinned and pierced. Love and loving service are beautiful things as our prayers and hymns attest - but they're also very risky.