

St Andrew's Cherry Hinton

Reflection on Maundy Thursday 17 April 2025

7.30 pm Eucharist following 6.30 pm meal with Foot-washing

## Gospel

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper **Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God**, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' Jesus answered, 'You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.' Peter said to him, 'You will never wash my feet.' Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.' Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!' Jesus said to him, 'One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.' For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, 'Not all of you are clean.'

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. **So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.** Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But it is to fulfil the scripture, "The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me." I tell you this now, before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am he. **Very truly, I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.**' (John 13:1-20)

## Jesus and Serious Times

David Ford

We are living in serious times.

Holy Week is the most serious time in the Christian year. Maundy Thursday is the evening on which Jesus prepared his disciples for the most serious event of all, his crucifixion the next day.

So, what can we learn from the Gospel we have just heard, Jesus washing the feet of his disciples, that can prepare us to live as his disciples now in our serious times?

Many things, I think. Here are just three of them. Each of them is amazing. In fact, of the three, I don't know which I find most mind-blowing. Each, in a different way, stretches our minds, hearts, imaginations, and sense of reality, of what it is we are part of, and how we should live. And each can help us prepare both for tomorrow, Good Friday, the most serious event in world history, and also for the serious times we are living through.

First, there is the fundamental truth of what we are part of with Jesus, however events—in the news or in our own lives—try to shake us, make us afraid, or tempt us to put our trust anywhere else than in Jesus and his Father. Here is our first text: **‘Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God...’** *All things in his hands*, which the next day were nailed to the cross. But now, at his last meal, the first thing he does with those hands is to wash the feet of his disciples. *The deepest truth about Jesus is that he is both utterly at one with his Father in love [he had **come from God and was going to God**] and utterly at one with us in love. ‘**Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.**’*

If you find this hard to take in, then you are not alone. The Church took nearly 300 years really to get hold of it, resulting in the Council of Nicea in the year 325, and the Nicene Creed that we say in most services of Holy Communion: ‘We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God... God from God... true God from true God... *of one Being with the Father*; through him all things were made... he became incarnate... and *was made man.*’

I have recently had a wonderful experience in relation to this. Next week, in Istanbul, the Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew is gathering twenty of the world's most distinguished Christian scholars to share their insights into the Council of Nicea in order to celebrate its 1700th anniversary this year. Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, is one of them.

So is Professor Frances Young, who, in my opinion, is the most distinguished living academic in the field of early Christian thought. (She is also godmother to one of our children.) Now in her eighties, she has recently published her two-volume *magnum opus*, *Doctrine and Scripture in Early Christianity*, which I have read and think is superb. A few weeks ago she sent me for comment a draft of her paper for next week's Istanbul celebration. It is called '*Homoousios* [that is the Greek word that is in the Nicene Creed, translated '*of one Being*'] and the Saving Mystery of the Cross'. I'll spare you the details, but what I found thrilling was how she had gone beyond her earlier understanding of the formative first three hundred years of Christian thought. Her new insight is that, throughout that period, not only was there deepening understanding of the unity of being between Jesus, his Father, and the Holy Spirit that led to the Nicene Creed and the doctrine of the Trinity. There was also, in both Eastern (Greek-speaking) and Western (Latin-speaking) Christianity, a common recurring theme, a shared insight into the crucifixion of Jesus, and so into the heart of our salvation.

What was the insight? It is this: Jesus, utterly one with God, is also, as Paul says, the second Adam or last Adam (Romans 5:12-21; 1 Corinthians 15:45), who is at one with all humanity; meaning, as the first chapter of the Letter to the Ephesians says: **'In [Jesus Christ, the Beloved of his Father] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished upon us. With all wisdom and insight [God] has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fulness of time, to gather up<sup>1</sup> all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth...'** (Ephesians 1:7-10) It is because '**all things**', all creation and

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<sup>1</sup> The Greek word translated 'gather up' is *anakephalaiōsasthai* meaning to recapitulate, sum up, bring to a head, culminate. Frances followed the first three hundred years from Paul through Irenaeus to Athanasius, and showed how in both East and West the recapitulation of all things in Jesus Christ is at the heart of the understanding of salvation, though later East and West diverge in the directions they take it.

all humanity, have, as our Gospel says, been given **'into his hands'** that his death in love is for all, and can bring about, as Paul says, **'a new creation'** (2 Corinthians 5:17). Those hands, nailed to the cross, do not stay there. On Easter Sunday, the crucified and resurrected Jesus shows those pierced hands to his disciples as he breathes the Holy Spirit into them and gives them their core vocation—and us our core vocation: **'Peace be with you!** [That peace is something we need to receive from him again and again in serious times] **As the Father has sent me, so I send you'** (20:21).

What does that mean for us now? That brings us to a second profound, inexhaustibly rich part of this evening's Gospel. This is the second text: **'So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.'** *He was sent to do humble, loving service. We are sent to do humble, loving service.* He often sprang surprises in how he did this. Foot-washing was only done by slaves or women. He is redefining what it is to be 'Lord and Teacher', what it is—to take something topical—to be great. As he heads for confrontation with the greatest empire the world had seen, backed by the most powerful army in the world, and acting with the most senior leaders of his own religion, he redefines greatness by washing dirty feet. It was the action of a slave just as crucifixion was a punishment for slaves. The challenge of his radical command, **'... you also should do as I have done to you'**, is to be inspired, by the Spirit he breathes into us day by day, to be as humble, as imaginative, and as daring in our loving service as the example of Jesus encourages us to be. And the most straightforward way to receive his Spirit is to receive daily the words he spoke, soaked in that Spirit.

Then, finally, there is the climactic surprise in our Gospel. This is the third text: **'Very truly, I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.'** What an amazing promise! Through receiving—welcoming in love—those who are sent to us, we receive not

only Jesus himself but also his Father. Could anything be more desirable, more fulfilling, more wonderful? Who has been sent to each one of us by Jesus? Are we open to who will be sent? Who has already been sent to us as a church? Are we open to who will be sent? I think we are already tasting something of the fulfilment of this promise. I trust that there is much, much more to come.

And tomorrow we will hear of the first fulfilment of it. While in agony on the cross, Jesus sends his mother to share her life with the disciple he loved: **“Woman, here is your son”**... **“Here is your mother.”** **And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.** (John 19:26-27) That verb **‘took’** is in Greek the same as the one translated **‘receives’** that is used three times in the final sentence of our Gospel. The beloved disciple has received the one sent by Jesus. This is the new community of love, the family of Jesus, blood-relations through the cross, to which we too belong. In these serious times, we need above all to be that community of mutual support, of humble service in love, and of welcoming whoever is sent to us. We are bound together by sharing in the body and blood of Jesus, as we are about to do now.

To conclude, as that astounding prayer in Ephesians Chapter 3 concludes:  
**‘Now to him, who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly for more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.**