

Maundy Thursday
Exodus 12:1-14
Ps. 116:1, 10-end
I Corinthians 11:23-26
John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Intimacy. Desire. Love.

We have journeyed with all three so far in this Holy Week. On Monday the intimacy of Mary anointing Jesus' feet and wiping them with her hair. On Tuesday the desire of the Greeks to see Jesus, and Jesus' desire to fulfil his glory on the cross. On Wednesday the love that brings a disciple to Jesus' breast and reveals the love that is at the heart of the Godhead, at the heart of all life.

On this night all of those meet in the actions and words of Jesus as he reacts to the actions and words of those around him. Maundy Thursday has to carry a lot of symbolism, perhaps too much for us to get our heads around, so many echoes and reflections in this one night. It is easy to miss God in all of the juggling of the symbols.

We will journey with R S Thomas, the Welsh poet priest, over these next days. He writes about this feeling of not quite getting it in his poem *Via Negativa*, the Way of Negation. "The Way of Negation is a tried and tested

way to know more of the living God beyond our categories and constructs. For R S Thomas it was the only way - to look in the gaps between, to read between the lines, to crucify all false expectations.”¹

*Why no! I never thought other than
That God is that great absence
In our lives, the empty silence
Within, the place where we go
Seeking, not in hope to
Arrive or find.
He keeps the interstices
In our knowledge, the darkness
Between stars.
His are the echoes
We follow, the footprints he has just
Left. We put our hands in His side hoping to find
It warm. We look at people
And places as though he had looked
At them, too; but miss the reflection.*

¹ Revd Canon Dr Roland Riem, *Holy Week Reflections 2021*,

“His are the echoes we follow ... the footprints he has just left ... but we miss the reflection.”

Like Peter, struggling with Jesus kneeling to wash feet; like Judas struggling with Jesus' refusal to seize power; like all the disciples struggling with what is going on, there is too much to take in on this night.

Firstly, there is the symbolism of the Passover, that's why we read Exodus and remind ourselves of the liberation of the people of Israel. The Passover meal, the sacrifice of the lambs, the exodus, have all been there in the background of John's gospel from the beginning, “behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” And now we come to “the hour”, Jesus' own exodus, his departure from life. In John's gospel Jesus dies at the moment of the sacrifice of the Passover lambs, central to the meal commemorating the final night of the people of Israel in Egypt.

Secondly, there is the act of foot washing. John is alone in including this in the story of this night, while Luke has Jesus talk about greatness and service, John has Jesus demonstrate it. Each year we are reminded of Jesus acting out his whole incarnation and ministry, as he takes off his robes, kneels, and one by one takes every disciple's foot.

Thirdly, we have the institution of the Eucharist, the Last Supper, which John doesn't feature. We give thanks for the meal at which Jesus tells us to take the bread as his body broken for us and to take the wine as his blood shed for us.

Fourthly, we have the new commandment, where today gets its name from. Commandment is *mandatum*, which becomes Maundy Thursday, the day of new commandments. And this new commandment? Love one another, just as Christ has loved us.

Fifthly, we have the garden of Gethsemane, the arrest, the trial that leads us into Good Friday morning. We commemorate that by stripping the altar at the end of the service, by transferring the Blessed Sacrament to the garden of repose, by watching as the disciples did as we remember the events of that night, and by leaving in darkness with no blessing or sending out.

What we begin this night as the sun sets, with these acts, does not finish until we receive the blessing at the end of the Easter Vigil as the sun rises. But in another sense what begins this night will never finish: complete and utter love, intimate, vulnerable, personal and mutual. So often though we miss the reflection, don't hear the echo, ignore the footprints.

Peter says, you will not wash my feet. We say it too, not just because we're too British to take our shoes off, but because we miss the reflection of Jesus' servanthood, we miss the echo of his self-giving love in amongst theories of appeasing sacrifice to a wrathful God. Then Peter says, not just my feet but all of me. We say it too when we want Jesus to be our magic charm, our get out of jail card, our protector, and we miss the footsteps that willingly lead to suffering and to the cross.

“Christ was very straight with Peter’s ignorance and desire. He needed to be cleansed, whether he understood it or not. He needed to accept the sign that he was cleansed, whether he was prepared to receive it gladly or not. Peter needed to meet Christ on His elusive terms, on the terms of Christ’s cleansing. If we want to know God, we must learn the ways of God – in echoes, footprints, and signs like the towel that Christ takes up and puts to our feet. It is a scandal that Christ should take hold of our feet when we have so much more engaging and attractive elements to our personalities with which to impress him. But he offers no more nor less than what we need to be part of Him.”²

² Roland Riems

Oil, water, towels, bread and wine the echoes of God's self-giving grace and life in Christ through the Spirit. The reflections of how God has looked at the world and responded. Tonight, we move through those symbols of the love that Jesus shows us until we gather tomorrow at the foot of the cross. We can do that however we want, by taking part, by sitting quietly, by reflecting on our own. And like Peter, like the Way of Negation, we can do it even if we don't quite understand it, if we can't quite grasp the nuance, if all we can see is the darkness between the stars.

However we do it, tonight is the invitation to follow the footsteps that Christ has left, to receive that love that Jesus has for you, to renew our call to love each other, and to use all that to let the world know that Jesus loves us, to the end. It is a simple act, undo your laces or your buckles, take off your sock; as simple as kneeling or bowing at the altar and putting out your hands. Whether we fully grasp what we are doing or not, we simply respond to the echo of God's love.

Intimacy. Desire. Love. In oil blessed, feet held and washed, and in bread broken and wine outpoured Jesus shows us all of them and shows us that all of them find their fulfilment in him. Come, follow the echo of God, see where Christ's footsteps will lead you on this holy night.