

MAUNDY THURSDAY 2017

St David's Eucharist of the Last Supper

'Human life is unhappy, bored and aimless without something to live for.' (*Keith Jones, Adam's Dream p116*)

Keith Jones, formerly Dean of Exeter then York, says this in a book he wrote a while ago now, called *Adam's Dream*. And he's very obviously right, of course. The events of these days of our Lord's passion, death and resurrection offer us three keys to combat unhappiness, boredom and aimlessness, indeed they are the source of all that gives life purpose and meaning and open the way to the most profound joy.

Today, Maundy Thursday, shows us the Lord's love in what he does as he shares that last meal with his friends that we remember especially this evening; Good Friday reveals his faith as he faces the supreme test of his passion and crucifixion; and Easter opens a new world of possibilities and relationship which is the life of heaven – the resurrection brings a new hope into this fallen world. So these are the keys to a life of fullness and ultimate joy: faith, hope and love. We begin tonight with love.

'Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end', says St John.

And tonight Jesus does two things which epitomise his love both then and now: he washes his friends' feet and he electrifies them by changing the script of the Passover seder or ritual meal.

The washing of the disciples' feet which we have just commemorated was, in the ancient world, an act usually performed by a slave, so it's no wonder that Peter recoils at seeing Jesus, his teacher, removing his tunic to bend down and do this menial task. 'Unless I wash you, you have no share with me', says Jesus. This is the action that unites Jesus and his disciples – this is their baptism. And by it they are initiated into his life of love, the love that finds its expression in serving others.

Jesus' love is outward-facing, and here he draws them into a deep intimacy with him so that they too might be turned outwards – 'I have set you an example, that you should also do as I have done to you.' This is the very opposite of the 'selfie' culture and the narcissistic echo-chamber of social media in which you can 'unfriend' the one who does not share your view of the world and is so unlike as to be unwelcome.

Rather here, in an act of service that they will never forget, because it is so intimate and personal, Jesus shows them how he wants them to be as people.

‘Love grows by the acts that express it’, said Archbishop William Temple, reflecting on this passage. This intimate action is what Jesus does for each of us as we allow him to wash our inmost parts. Peter’s refusal is so human, so like us in our unwillingness to allow God to do for us what he would and our disbelief that he could really love me as much as that.

But he does. And the other sign he gives his friends that evening is this ritual meal in which we shall presently share, his re-imagining of the Passover.

As we walked away from the Cathedral on Monday night having listened to Bach’s wonderful St John Passion there was a clear sky and the full moon accompanied by the evening star glowed bright: and I remembered it was the night of Passover, the night on which those events we’d just been hearing about first happened.

Danny Finkelstein, writing in his Times diary referred to it last Saturday because he was so looking forward to it, with its special shared food and the intimacy of the whole family, young and old, gathered to hear again the ancient story of their freedom from slavery in Egypt to a new life as God's people in their promised land – a story we shall presently hear too.

There is no account in John of the Last Supper because his understanding of it really suffuses the whole of his gospel; for him it is simply a given of Christian life that Jesus is the living bread come down from heaven in which we share at every Eucharist and this bread gives life to the world. In his gospel alone Jesus is referred to as the lamb of God who will be killed on the cross at the same time as the Passover lambs are being sacrificed in the Temple and which will be eaten at the seder.

It is that self-giving which is the mark of Jesus' love for his friends which gives depth and new meaning to this simple sharing of bread and wine: this is my body which is given for you; drink this cup of the new covenant in my blood to remember me. This is how he becomes literally part of us and we of him: there can be no greater intimacy of closeness than that. This is what sustains his life in us: this is what will enable us to love as he loves us.

So this night is one in which we recall the signs of God's love for us in Jesus, not as mere ritual, though, but as part of the lived reality of who we are as Christians. For this is no easy love for us any more than it was for him. The proof and the power of Jesus' love is only fully revealed tomorrow, Good Friday. Love grows by the acts that express it.

So we shall move, as Jesus did, from the warmth and intimacy of this meal into the harshness, hatred and lack of comprehension of what St John simply calls, 'the world'.

And heavens, how that world longs to see acts of love such as his. We had a glimpse of that only the other day as thousands lined the streets of Westminster for the funeral of an ordinary man, Keith Palmer, kind and generous it would seem, whose dedicated service to others put him in harm's way – and drew others to him both in life and in death.

'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.' A new commandment: *mandatum novum*, Maundy Thursday.