

Sunday 15th May 2022, 5th Sunday of Easter: John 13:12-17 & 31-35 'Love'

I wonder if any of you have had the experience of someone else washing your feet? It's a well-established tradition in some churches, though I must confess not in the churches I grew up in. But about 15 years ago our church in London had a foot-washing service for Maundy Thursday, and Alise and I attended.

I didn't really know what to expect; for all that it was something Jesus told his disciples to do (as we've just heard in our passage), the early church had quickly decided that of the five direct commands of Jesus to his followers – to make disciples of all nations, to baptise new believers, to teach people what Jesus had taught, to share bread and wine to remember Jesus and to wash each other's feet – the foot-washing was the one that didn't make the cut as part of the daily practice of the church. Take a look at my feet and you'll know why!

So I went obediently, but somewhat quizzically; I was expecting it to feel a bit weird, to be honest. But I was blown away. It was an incredibly moving experience. When one of our church pastors knelt down and began to wash my sweaty toes and then dry them gently with a towel I practically burst into tears. It's hard to explain, but I suddenly got what Jesus saying. **If you want a picture of humility, of the sort of loving service Jesus is calling us to, washing other people's feet is about as perfect as it gets.**

Those of you who know the background to this famous story in the gospels will know that in the culture of the day, only servants would do this menial task, which is why the disciples are outraged that Jesus should try and do it: he's the boss, why would he humiliate himself like this? But Jesus, as always, gently helps his disciples to see why he wanted to do this. He uses it as an opportunity to teach on the nature of true love.

Love is a small word with a big and complex set of meanings. It's a word we use often but I think often quite carelessly. There are many different types of love – and if you're looking for a good book on this theme, C.S. Lewis' classic little book 'The Four Loves' is still as good as you'll find. I've said this before but it's worth repeating: in the Greek-infused culture of Jesus' day there were three different words for love: *eros* = physical or sexual love; *philia* = friendship or liking kind of love; *storge* = family affection. So the culture understood that love has different guises, it wears different clothing if you like, depending on the context.

But none of these words for love appear in our passage. Of course the disciples have *philia* love for each other, they're great friends. Some of them were also related – Peter and Andrew were brothers, as were James and John, so when John came to write his gospel he could even have used *storge* love to define their relationships. But this is not the word that comes out of the mouth of Jesus: **it is a totally new word for love, invented by the first generation of Christians, and that is agape.**

Why did they invent a new word for love? Well, because **they saw in Jesus a totally new understanding of love**. It was love that went beyond affection and friendship to something even more profound: **humble and selfless service**. It was the love that Jesus modelled to the disciples and the world: in footwashing, of course, but also in blessing outcasts, defending the vulnerable and oppressed, and supremely in giving his own life on the cross for humanity. This is love as Jesus defines it – and it was so radically new that it needed a new word, the word that came to dominate the pages of the New Testament: *agape*.

So when Jesus reflects on what he'd just done for the disciples by washing their feet, he uses this as his core definition of love: when he says 'love one another', he doesn't say *philia* one another (i.e. like one another), or *storge* one another (i.e. be loyal to each other) – though of course it's good to like and be loyal. **He says agape one another – in other words, serve them humbly and unconditionally.**

This is the sting in the tail of this passage, and it's what is both so beautiful and so challenging about it. We use the word love all the time, and many of our favourite songs sing about it endlessly – but almost none of them use the meaning of love that Jesus uses. To paraphrase Star Trek: it's love, Jim, but not as we know it.

This is the love that Jesus calls us to have, not just for Jesus, but for each other. We are called to love like Jesus, as Jesus has loved us. It is a high calling, and we cannot do it in our own strength. It's no surprise that, a few minutes later, in the very next chapter, Jesus starts teaching about how God's Holy Spirit dwells inside his followers, because **we need God's help to practise this kind of love**. It's the Spirit that causes this kind of love to well up in our hearts and overflow out into the lives of others.

So as I close, let's pray for Jesus' Spirit to fill us again with this kind of love. And let's listen to the best definition of this love that was ever written, the words of 1 Corinthians 13: it's not just a passage for a wedding, but for all of us – this is how we love, and may God grant us grace to this kind of life this week, and beyond:

⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. ⁸ Love never fails.

Amen.