

## **Maundy Thursday, 2017, St Chad's Ladybarn**

On Tuesday some of us heard challenging readings from John's Gospel and 1 Corinthians about how Jesus is both foolishness and a stumbling block to many, even as he his salvation for others. We heard about a scandalous Christ. A Christ who scandalized intellectuals and seekers of signs of power.

To scandalize is "to shock, as by improper behaviour". Jesus was a master of it. From who he ate with to when he healed, he caused scandal even as he did his Father's will.

I'd like us to consider two moments of scandal, concerning Peter and Judas. Peter is scandalised by the idea of Jesus washing his feet. But it's not the first time in the week that a disciple has been scandalised by an act of love.

### **Peter scandalised**

I'm sure many of you will be aware of the nature of foot washing in Jesus' day and who did it.

It was a menial task, an unpleasant but necessary task performed by a servant. That is the root of the scandal of Jesus washing feet.

In Peter's world, Jesus is the boss and bosses do not stoop down to wash feet. Why should it bother Peter what Jesus chooses to do, if he is the boss after all shouldn't Peter just go along with it?

But Peter has placed Jesus on a pedestal, seemingly a good thing – but I don't think it is.

Because Peter is still stuck thinking in terms of pedestals. He is still living in a world of status, position, the great and the lowly.

A world where we all try to climb the ladder, stepping on each other's heads if we need to in order to "make it".

Peter is scandalised because Jesus doesn't just turn the hierarchy, the pecking order upside down; he dispenses with it altogether: "what I have done for you, you must do for each other."

When Peter realises this is the only way to belong to Christ, his love and devotion wins out over the scandal. Eventually he allows himself to be washed, to be served.

Jesus' act demonstrates love and calls us to loving service of each other without regard for status or who deserves to be loved.

But there is something else I think we must understand and embrace through this act of washing feet. Perhaps best illustrated by my friends in the L'Arche community.

### **Foot Washing at L'Arche**

The communities consist of people with disabilities and those without living together. One struggle has been finding language to refer to people's roles. Should those who do the majority of the caring be called carers? Or service providers? Or staff? "Assistants" is what they settled on.

But the struggle comes from the desire to avoid casting some as "the needy" and others as a different kind of person. For this sharp division makes community difficult. Yet most of

the time *care is offered in one direction*: those who are more physically or intellectually able caring for those who are less able.

This caring is as beautiful as well as essential. I have seen examples of the self-less kind of service to which Jesus calls us when he says "Love one another".

Care requires attentiveness and patience. It bestows dignity and gives comfort when it is done well.

***But it is often in one direction.***

This is why Maundy Thursday is an especially important time for the community.

Later today, at Heathside, the L'Arche house, care and love will be offered in every direction: all feet can be washed by the different members however more or less able they are. This too bestows dignity.

**To love is to be fully human; to *receive* love is also to be what we are made to be.**

But do you, do I, find it easy to accept the care and the help of another? Do you find it easy to allowing yourself to be served; to allow yourself to be dependent on another? I don't.

It makes me vulnerable and involves my admitting a need. It can mean my allowing another to do something for me which I wish I could do for myself. It can involve my admitting my weakness, my lack of competence, my frailty.

I was particularly taught as a young man to be self-sufficient, to stand on my own two feet, to manage my own affairs and succeed.

What I had to learn as I met and married Naomi was how to receive love; how to stop being self-sufficient. I had to learn, and I am still learning how to allow another to love me. How to say "I need you. Can you help me?"

And, you know, sometimes I think we need to allow others to love us and care for us even when we don't feel we need it. Because to allow another to love us is to give them a gift, an opportunity to flourish, to be more fully human.

Sometimes people speak about the give and take of human relationships.

The problem with this language is that it can make a relationship sound like a deal, like a scorecard, both sides of which must balance at all times, as I give and then I take.

The love that Jesus demonstrates and calls us to is not an exchange though: you do for me and I do for you and then we're even and equal.

The washing of feet with Jesus' command to do this to each other *and to love each other* is about **gratuity - a freely given gift not an exchange.**

Love is a gift not a contract. The love which Jesus shows is uncalculating.

To love is to give and to care without hope or expectation of reward;

To allow another to love means resisting the urge to pay them back, to keep the balance sheet even. It is to accept the gift and treasure it.

### **In one sense, love is not useful.**

To truly love one another will not serve our reputations; it won't guarantee us high esteem in the eyes of the world; it won't even necessarily make us look good or clever or competent. This brings me to Judas.

### **Judas Scandalized**

Earlier in the week Jesus has been anointed by a woman at Bethany. And Judas was scandalised. She uses expensive perfume and Judas protests at the waste – it could be sold and the money used to feed the poor! Of course, the gospel tells us that Judas had little concern for the poor.

Yet he is scandalised. Why?

I think it is ***because Jesus allows a woman to love him in an extravagant way instead of being concerned with calculating what is useful.***

It is a pointless, an extravagant act: it doesn't, in the eyes of Judas, serve a useful purpose. The love demonstrated by this woman is too excessive for those who look on and grumble. Jesus, however, sees it as beautiful and receives it as such.

At times we may be a little like Judas and the grumblers – having learnt as we have grown that we must find our purpose in life, we must be competent, our actions must make things happen in the world, we must achieve, we must show we are of value.

We feel we must justify our place in the world by being useful.

Ultimately, Judas seems to have become frustrated with Jesus – with Jesus' lack of regard for greatness and power and victory. I think perhaps this is what leads him to betray his friend.

Jesus no longer serves Judas' purpose.

### ***Are we so very different from Judas and Peter?***

Often we are taught in this world to see other people as means to an end: a means to advance ourselves; a means to gain some prestige or influence.

We learn in this world that other people can be a means of us feeling more important or getting what we want.

Judas is scandalised because the unnamed woman's act is gratuitous. In a sense it achieves nothing except insofar as it expresses love.

### ***Are we willing to love and to receive and be reshaped by God's love, even when it does little serve our goals and ambitions?***

To return to Peter, I think he is scandalised because to wash feet seems to be taking several steps down the ladder of status and reputation. In fact Jesus is not taking a step down the ladder of success; he is throwing the ladder away.

This is the call of discipleship – to give up on ladders of success and projects to gain us prestige. This doesn't mean giving up on doing good in the world; far from it.

But the call is to love whether it serve our ambitions or not, whether we are thanked and

appreciated or not, to love those we find lovely and those whom we do not.

We are called to imitate the Christ who caused scandal and was rejected for his gratuitous, unsettling love.

**This morning we gather a table to which we are all welcome, a table to which we need not earn our access.** It is a table to which we need bring no great gift or skill or goodness.

We are welcomed as we are as an act of gratuitous love.

We all share in one bread and one cup whatever our abilities and frailties. We come to eat and drink and receive Jesus.

The Jesus we neither deserve nor need to impress.

The Jesus who loves us as we are and gave his life for us.

Amen.