

Reflection for Maundy Thursday April 9th 2020

Each time I hear that Exodus reading about the Passover I'm taken back to Maundy Thursday evenings in the church of St Mary and St Peter Wilmington over 50 years ago. That passage was always read by the same man who by a strange coincidence was called Love, Harry Love. I can hear him now rehearsing all that **detail** –twilight, blood on the doorposts, eat in haste, roast not boiled, loins girded, sandals on feet, staff in hand.

The Passover is part of **our** story – the Judaeo Christian story of wondering about God. People used to think that animal sacrifice pleased God and earned his favour. Sacrifice literally means holy doing. The story of the Passover tells us that the Israelites did as God commanded and they escaped from slavery in Egypt. Years later they entered the promised land and following God's rules to the letter became a way to please him. It was transactional. When everyone followed the rules the community prospered. That was part of the context of Jesus' ministry.

John's account of Jesus' last meal with his disciples is completely different from the other gospels. Writing over 50 years after the events, he wants us to understand that Jesus knew that this was to be the last time that he would have a sustained conversation with his disciples. What did he most want them to remember?

Imagine the scene – a group of friends, a beloved community, sharing a meal with their leader. The meal is in full swing. Animated conversation. Some gentle joshing.

Without any warning, **in the middle of the meal** Jesus silently stands up, strips off and fetches water and a towel. What is happening? The sound of conversation dies to silence. They all look at each other wondering. Jesus kneels and starts to wash the first disciple's feet. There is the gentle sound of trickling water - as love is poured out. Their attention is fixed on Jesus and on what he is doing. You can feel the questions in the silence. Jesus moves to the next disciple and again in the silence there is the sound of trickling water - as love is poured out. All remain silent as the washing is repeated again and again.. Suddenly Peter breaks the silence with a cry of protest "Lord you will never wash **my** feet". Jesus gently replies "Unless I wash you you have no share with

me” . And the room returns to silence apart from the sound of trickling water - as love is poured out.

At the end Jesus sits down and looks round at the disciples with a smile “Well – what do you make of that then?” Another silence – broken by Jesus. “Let’s look at it this way. You see me as your leader and so I am but I washed your feet. I’m showing you that leadership is not about status but function. As your Lord and Master there are **some things that only I can do** but I don’t claim any status. There are things that we can all do for each other. None of us is more important than anyone else.

One more thing – here is a new commandment – Love one another as I have loved you. If you do **that** people will know that you are **my** disciples.

The Jewish backstory was one of confidence in living according to rules and detailed observance. That is relatively easy. You have a check list and if you follow it everything will be OK.

But this **new** commandment - Love one another – It’s easy to remember – but it’s so open ended, so ill-defined. There aren’t any protocols or check lists. We are let loose in the world with this nebulous command. How will we know that we are doing it right? The good news is that we are not alone. The Holy Spirit is with us, the Paraclete constantly by our side – to guide , to advise, to strengthen and, yes, to admonish,

Michael asked me to speak at this service about six weeks ago. For many of us church is about community and doing things for others. In my first draft I finished by saying something about doing small humble things with great love. But since then so much has changed.

Today a huge number of people **are** lovingly serving others at great personal cost but for many of us the practical side of care for each other has been severely curtailed. I must admit I find it frustrating.

John Milton, the great 17th century poet, experienced a similar frustration after he became blind in adult life. In the sonnet on his blindness he asks himself what God thinks of him because he isn’t doing much to serve in a practical way. He identifies the importance of patience and ends confidently

They also serve who only stand and wait.

Many of us are standing and waiting. It sounds very passive. But Milton knew that he could serve as he did so. He went on to write *Paradise Lost*.

The church is entering a period of waiting tonight, watching with the Lord in the garden, waiting at the foot of the cross and waiting in that mysterious emptiness of Holy Saturday. For the church we know **that** waiting will end on Sunday.

But beyond Easter we will still be waiting. Our sacrifice – our holy doing – is to follow today's rules to the letter for the common good, to do what we can with great love and to stand and wait in joyful hope.

An early 13th century mosaic from Monreale Cathedral in Sicily.

Exodus 12; 1-14, **12** The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: ²This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. ³Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. ⁴If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in

obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. ⁵Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. ⁶You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. ⁷They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. ⁸They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. ⁹Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. ¹⁰You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. ¹¹This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the LORD. ¹²For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD. ¹³The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. ¹⁴This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.

I Corinthians 11:23-26, ²³For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, ²⁴and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

John 13; 1-17 & 31b-35 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. ²The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper ³Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, ⁴got up from the table, ⁵took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. ⁵Then 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. ⁶He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" ⁷Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." ⁸Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." ⁹Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" ¹⁰Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, ¹¹but is entirely clean. And you ¹²are clean, though not all of you." ¹¹For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."

¹²After 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? ¹³You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶Very truly, I tell you, servants ¹⁷are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. ¹⁷If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. ¹⁸I 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 ¹⁹has lifted his heel against me.' ¹⁹I tell you this now, before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am he. ²⁰Very truly, I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me." "Now the Son of Man has been

glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³² If God has been glorified in him, ³³ God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. ³⁴ Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' ³⁵ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁶ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."