

# Such Love ...

## *... will eventually catch up with us*

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*A reflection given on Maundy Thursday 9<sup>th</sup> April 2020, in the Online Service by the Vicar, the Revd. Canon Jonathan Baker*

*John 13.1-17, 31b-35*

As we journey through Holy Week, we draw nearer to the cross of Christ, where God's love is most fully revealed to the world. This scene in John's Gospel of Jesus washing his disciples' feet is an acted parable of God's love, preparing us to understand the significance of what will happen on Good Friday. In the first verse we are told, 'having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.' This love doesn't give up. It's the faithful love of the creator God, who having called the world into being, doesn't walk away from it, no matter what the cost. Sometimes in the church, we talk about love in ways that risk sounding a bit sentimental. All we have to do is love each other, we say. But in reality, love is difficult. In our fallen, imperfect world, love is often costly. It shows itself in humble service. It also shows itself in ways that may be personally sacrificial. And when Jesus washes his disciples' feet, he's not just telling them to look after each other. He's explaining the significance of his approaching death. Dying a criminal's death as a result of innocent obedience to God, Jesus's sacrifice on the cross will wash away the sins of the world, and reveal the loving heart of God, whose love for his wayward creatures will not be deflected, no matter how great the cost. The action of washing the disciples' feet takes place against a darkening backdrop. There is an atmosphere of anxiety and uncertainty. Forces hostile to Jesus are gathering. The disciples are discombobulated by their master acting like a slave. It's unclear to them whether Jesus is still in control, whether he knows what he's doing. The narrative as John tells it is shot through with a theme of impending betrayal. We're told at the beginning that the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot to betray Jesus. And the verses just after the foot-washing have Jesus warning his disciples that one of them will betray him. They deny it, of course, but it's clear all of them are worried, lest they might unwittingly be the betrayer. And when we celebrate Holy Communion, our liturgy always reminds us that the Lord's Supper was shared 'in the same night that he was betrayed'. Although Judas is the one who actually betrays

Jesus, there is a sense that it could have been any of them; that all of us have it within us, in the wrong circumstances, to allow our loyalty to Jesus to be compromised. So on Maundy Thursday, human betrayal and fickleness sit alongside God's utter faithfulness, loving his own to the end. I take great comfort from that. Not even Judas's deliberate betrayal can deflect Jesus from his purpose. Not even my weakness and muddled priorities can deflect God's determination to keep on loving me – and you – to the uttermost, no matter what the cost. Such love is disorientating. No wonder the disciples were confused and unsure, both of themselves and Jesus. But what an amazing truth – that Jesus' love for you and me will go the distance, no matter what we do to try and escape it or throw it off course. Such love will eventually catch up with us. But it does so not usually in great epiphanies or dramatic experiences, but in the discovery of our own acceptability and in our growing capacity to share that welcome with others, which Jesus says is the mark by which we shall be known as those who belong to him.

As the poet-priest Malcolm Guite puts it:

*And here he shows the full extent of love  
To us whose love is always incomplete,  
In vain we search the heavens high above,  
The God of love is kneeling at our feet.  
Though we betray him, though it is the night,  
He meets us here and loves us into light.*

## Reading Texts

John13: 1-17, 34-35

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. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then 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. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' Jesus answered, 'You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.' Peter said to him, 'You will never wash my feet.' Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.' Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!' Jesus said to him, 'One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.' For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, 'Not all of you are clean.' After 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? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'