

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.

Tonight, we are remembering the significant actions of Jesus in the last day of his life, actions that are both firsts and lasts. These are summed up for us in the new commandment that he gives to his confused disciples. “Love one another” Jesus says. “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”

The focus of our Gospel reading is at first on Jesus washing his disciples’ feet. The Holy Land was a dusty and dirty place where many folks walked from place to place. It was a normal act of hospitality in those lands for a servant or slave to wash the feet of a visitor. So, it’s puzzling that here, it is the master, Jesus, washing the feet of the servants, the disciples, during their last meal together. Especially as Jesus knew that he had only a few hours of life ahead of him. We might have expected that he would be praying, or spending time in silent preparation – but instead he’s washing feet, taking the role of a servant.

Peter, as usual, acts as the spokesperson for the disciples. They are all, no doubt, very uncomfortable with their Lord and Master wanting to wash their feet. Peter, in no uncertain terms, refuses to have his feet washed. Jesus acknowledges that Peter doesn’t at present understand what is going on but will do later. The implication being that Peter will only understand after the resurrection. But unless Jesus washes his feet, Peter will have no share in Jesus. The Hebrew word for ‘share’ describes the ‘share’ of land that each tribe of Israel is given in the Promised land – a heritage with spiritual as well as economic significance. So, using that word, share, means Jesus is telling Peter that he is in danger of eternal disinheritance if he refuses to allow his feet to be washed.

Clearly such a strong response by Jesus to Peter, means that there must be something more going on here than foot washing. This is not a simple story about the humility of Jesus. Its meaning has to do with his death. The story foreshadows Jesus’ ultimate act of servanthood – his death on the cross. Jesus is preparing the disciples for his cross. His humble service at this table is a foretaste of the larger act of humble service that he will offer on the cross at his death.

So first, we are to see Jesus’ washing of feet as an interpretation of his serving, saving death. We are then ready to look at this washing drama as an instruction of what all followers of Jesus are to be and do. And it’s more than kindly deeds for a neighbour, more than giving to charity.

Following his example of foot washing, Jesus says to the disciples, “you also ought to wash one another’s feet.” That means creating a community of equals, where the status of superior/inferior is reversed in the act of service. Jesus defies the normal order of hierarchy, and models a new kind of equality, by taking on the role of a servant. Then Jesus says, in verse 16, “¹⁶ Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. ¹⁷ If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.”

What Jesus is saying, is that it is enough for his disciples to be like their teacher in humility, but they should not hold themselves higher than Jesus. By lowering himself to the lowest of humble service by washing the disciples’ feet, (and later by dying on the cross), he establishes a ceiling above which the disciples cannot in good faith aspire to rise. It is a low ceiling; one that allows no prideful person to enter, or, at the very least, allows no prideful person to have any comfort.

We look at Jesus’ act of humble service, then the disciples’ humble service to each other. Only then does the wider principle become clear. Jesus gives the disciples, and us, a new Commandment.

He says, in verse 34,

“³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

However, the new commandment is not entirely new. Leviticus 19:18 says, “You shall not take vengeance nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am Yahweh.” Leviticus goes on to include all people, “The stranger who lives as a foreigner with you shall be to you as the native-born among you, and you shall love him as yourself.”

What then was new about the commandment? Jesus gives us the example of loving action by his own servanthood. He also focuses on the Christian community and our neighbours. And this new commandment initiates a new covenant. The mark of faithfulness to the old covenant was obedience to the Torah. The mark of faithfulness to the new covenant is love for those within the community of faith.

Jesus commands us to treat one another with love even if it is difficult, or it runs counter to prevailing norms. Or if we cannot see the outcome. Or even if doing so does not entirely make sense. Because the focus is on loving action rather than loving feelings. That way, loving all our neighbours is possible for any one of us.

In John chapter 15, Jesus will repeat the commandment, saying, “¹² This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ No one has greater love than this; to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (15:12-13).

In his own life, Jesus translates love into action, and that benefits everyone.

He calls us to do the same. **AMEN**