

I'm going to begin this evening by breaking a second time one of my rules – that one which says we must not anticipate the resurrection before the Easter Vigil, but that we need to live through the events of the Passion first. However, this Easter poem by the metaphysical poet Edmund Spenser seem to me to focus on the meaning of this evening's celebrations:

Most glorious Lord of life, that on this day,  
Didst make thy triumph over death and sin:  
And having harrow'd hell, didst bring away  
Captivity thence captive, us to win:  
This joyous day, dear Lord, with joy begin,  
And grant that we for whom thou diddest die,  
Being with thy dear blood clean wash'd from sin,  
May live for ever in felicity.  
And that thy love we weighing worthily,  
May likewise love thee for the same again:

And for thy sake, that all like dear didst buy,  
With love may one another entertain.

So let us love, dear love, like as we ought,  
Love is the lesson which the Lord us taught.

We know that John, whose gospel account we read from tonight, is usually identified with the beloved disciple, the disciple Jesus loved, and it is indeed love that unites the three major movements of tonight's liturgy.

With practical love we are reminded that we should wash one another's feet and serve each other in humility as Jesus chose to serve us.

With sacrificial love we relive the Last Supper and the sharing of the Body and Blood of Jesus.

With longing love we spend the last hours with Jesus in the garden before his betrayal.

Each of these brings home in a different way the whole scope of love that followers of Jesus should aspire to, but I want to focus briefly on the washing of feet, for while the other two are personal and intimate, though shared with other Christians, the washing of feet – humble service – is something by which we are known and often judged.

It is in the nature of John's gospel that each chosen event in the life of Jesus is told in order to build up a reflective picture of the Jesus he knew. *'Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.'* (Jn 20.30-31) We are not meant to come away from a reading of John's gospel knowing

the story alone, but the aim is that we will know the person at the centre of the story.

As I have suggested already this week, that person is a puzzle to those around him. The great baptismal teaching passages of John's gospel – the woman at the well; the man born blind; the raising of Lazarus – these, and many others, are met with incredulity and lack of understanding. There is a sweet irony in the way John writes so profoundly about the events and teaching of Jesus, and the questions of the disciples just seem so stupid in comparison. If you are present at 11.00 this evening for the reading of the Last Discourse, you will see that this questioning actually goes on to the bitter end, so that Jesus himself ends up asking Philip: *'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?'* (Jn 14.9a)

For the washing of the feet it is Peter who fails to understand. First he refuses to allow his Master to wash his feet; then, when Jesus tells him he can have nothing more to do with him unless he has his feet washed, he begs to be washed all over. My father consistently refused requests to have his feet washed on Maundy Thursday, claiming that he had too much respect for the priest – but he had enough experience of priests who had never even tried to learn humility (and some who practised false humility) that I wonder if he refused because of the fact that he hated hypocrisy.

Yet for bishops and priests who are called regularly to stand in the person of Christ at the altar, such humility of heart is necessary, and it is no accident that Jesus insists on setting his first followers, who would be the first to stand in his person in the following generations, an example of the humility which is needful.

We all stand in the person of Christ through our baptism, and when we live out our lives in the world, we are all required to show the same level of humble service, being prepared to place ourselves at the beck and call of others, being ready to love in practical ways without hope of return. And let us not forget that in the society where Jesus lived, the washing of feet was also a sign of welcome and hospitality to both friend and stranger. Our homes and our churches (including the communities inside!) should have that same spirit of humble service.

So, as we re-enact the washing of feet from the Last Supper of Jesus, let it be for all of us a commitment to serve, a commitment to real humility, and a commitment to set one another an example. *‘I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.’* (Jn13.15) **PC, April 2014; revised April 2019**