**Maundy Thursday 2017**

Exodus 12. 1 – 14
1 Corinthians 11. 23 - 26
John 13. 1 – 17, 31b – 35

Prayer

When I take school assemblies and I am perhaps talking about one of the events in Jesus’ life I quite often ask the children how they think the protagonists might feel. So this evening I want to take you to that upper room and I want you to imagine the different emotions experienced by those who were there – the disciples, Jesus, the women who were perhaps in the background serving the food. I want you to feel the air: hot, heavy, charged. It had been quite a week. The anointing at Bethany with all its connotations of death, the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the incomprehension of the disciples, the gathering storm clouds of approaching death. So here we have this intimate gathering, just those who have been with Jesus from the beginning, his friends and companions, the core community if you like. Fear hangs heavy in the air amidst the familiarity of shared food. Jesus, profoundly aware that this is his last meal with these beloved friends, these friends whom he loves to the very end and this includes Judas. Yes, Judas is going to betray him but Jesus’ love for him is no less as we explored on Monday evening. Imagine too how Judas’s heart may be pounding, wondering whether he has the courage to do what he has arranged. Does he know betrayal destroys the betrayer.

And then Jesus does the most remarkable thing. He washes his friends’ feet. In itself not a remarkable act in that culture, but one that would have been the task of a servant so what is he expressing to this intimate group? This motley band of disciples are very shortly to become the leaders of the church, the leaders of the new community. They have learnt a lot over the past three years about the values of the kingdom, but in this act Jesus is expressing something new and surprising about the nature of leadership.

Firstly yes, there is the concept of service, of exercising a role that is servant shaped. This does not mean being a doormat but it does mean knowing that your raison d’être, your very purpose in life is to care for others and to take Christ as the pattern for that servant shaped life. Jesus was no doormat, yet much of his active ministry was spent caring for those who were pushed to the margins either by sickness or by social mores. He truly is our servant king.

Secondly, vulnerability. To kneel at someone’s feet puts you in a place of supreme vulnerability. You can be kicked. Notice that Jesus removes his outer garment, it is as though he is taking off all that might preserve him from whatever humanity will fling at him. So vulnerability must be part of leadership. We have a tendency to imagine that leadership is all about saying what is to happen, being the boss who says what goes and everybody else simply falls in line. But real leadership begins with that servant heart and being prepared to be vulnerable. It is this sort of leadership that will enable growth and movement.

Thirdly love. We normally associate washing feet with children. Those of you who have had the privilege and joy of being parents will remember drying the feet of your children and playing this little piggy went to market. But to wash and dry somebody’s feet, whether adult or child, is an act of love. The Gospel that we have just heard does indeed place love at the very beginning. “Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.” It is an act of intimacy. I remember a conversation with someone who was a nurse and worked with the homeless who came into St Martin in the Fields and said that it was always the feet of the homeless that needed so much care. When I wash your feet this evening, and I do hope that as many of you as are able will come forward to have your feet washed – it’s not for a select few, but for everybody – it will be an expression of love.

So what Jesus is doing on this night before he is arrested, tried, crucified, is to express to the disciples, this core community, that leadership is about living a servant shaped life, it is about being prepared to be vulnerable and it is supremely about love.

The conversation between Peter and Jesus centres around these three concepts. Peter finds it difficult to accept the servant nature of leadership but he also highlights a further aspect to it. To be servant shaped you also have to allow others to serve you. And you know, in many ways that is more difficult. Peter is caught in his recognition that this is the Messiah who is kneeling at his feet, he is caught in the normal way of thinking that Jesus turns upside down. Peter veers from one extreme to the other. At first he cannot accept Jesus in the role of a servant nor can he allow himself to be served, he cannot accept that vulnerability and then he goes to the other extreme. Dear Peter, I almost feel he wants to prove his love for Jesus when of course, Jesus knows and loves him as he is.

So before Jesus goes to his death the core community, the disciples and we the church are reminded of the values that must lie at the heart of that core community and of the church if it is to lead into the future. Jesus is subverting the norms and doing something new. The new commandment of love played out in service and in vulnerability is to take the place of law leading people into a new way of being for God. Law does not allow for vulnerability, law does not allow for service, law does not allow for love. To fulfil the law is to find the gaps and the questions that will let in these characteristics. To fulfil the law is to subvert it, to turn it upside down.

So let’s return a moment to that upper room. Did the disciples trust this new commandment? What was going on in their hearts? Were they confused? Were they fearful. Had they hoped all might be well, hoped Jesus would reassure them, perform a miracle? Nothing has happened to change the fear hanging in the air and yet somehow Jesus is pointing to a future they haven’t dared to contemplate. ”A new commandment I give you….” As we later go with the disciples to Gethsemane and watch and wait, as we stand at the foot of the cross tomorrow let us, with them, dare to contemplate that future and reflect upon how we can truly be servant shaped, vulnerable and loving for in that we shall be learning to live out the resurrection and build a church with firm foundations, a subversive church, a church that will grow and flourish.