



Maundy Thursday

9th April 2020

Dear Friends in Christ,

'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. (John 13: 16 & 17)

Yesterday afternoon, I took a funeral at Magdalen Hill Cemetery. Set high above the City of Winchester, it is elegant and tranquil; a fitting space in which to lay to rest and gather to remember those we love. The death of the beloved is always a tragedy, yet in this time of Lockdown it is particularly hard for grieving families and friends. Only next of kin are able to attend either a cremation or a burial at the graveside only. Our churches are locked by Government decree and I am not allowed to open them even for a funeral. Yesterday, with the noise of traffic from city and motorway quelled, immediate family gathered - even then needing to observe a two metre space from each other. We were, however, blessed by a beautiful afternoon and, thankfully, the family found great comfort in the service we shared together. The lady who had died was a much loved wife, sister and aunt with a strong Christian faith. As her funeral was to take place in Holy Week, her coffin was adorned with a crucifix. It became a blessed focus for our service, through which I was able to explain the truth of Jesus' death and resurrection. I could see the light of hope kindle in their eyes and hearts as I spoke, and in this act of my servant ministry to them, Jesus met with them and brought them His peace – just as surely as He has done in person to the faithful woman whose life we shall commemorate in St Catherine's Church post-lockdown!



Jesus washes His disciples' feet

Maundy Thursday, the first day in the Easter Triduum, is an opportunity for Christians to commemorate the last servant actions of Christ to His disciples. Even in these scant hours of His earthly life, Jesus continued to teach them how to live as *People of the Way* after His death. These simple actions of washing their feet and sharing a meal with them were radical and shocking to His friends. They struggled to comprehend their meaning and had to live through the events of the following harrowing days in order to perceive their importance to the world. They would come to understand the meaning of Lockdown only too well!



The Church of The Holy Sepulchre



The Tomb of Christ

In the Old City of Jerusalem, The Church of the Holy Sepulchre is the focal point of Christian worship across all denominations. It is said to be the site of Golgotha, where Jesus was crucified, and also the site of Jesus' tomb. In this way, it distills the very essence of our Christian faith. Yet even in this holy Basilica tensions run high. I have witnessed first-hand a full on body fight between two women of different denominations as one dared to encroach onto the other's denominational territory in the act of cleaning the floor!

At the beginning of 2012, my intrepid daughter, Eleanor, came with me on her second visit to the Holy Land. I was going on what's called in the trade a '*Fam Tour*' for prospective clergy Pilgrimage Tour Leaders. Though she was only 14, she was allowed to come out as my 'spouse equivalent' for the week because the year before she had raised several thousand pounds for McCabe Educational Trust (a charity which supports Christian communities in the Holy Land), by walking three times around the City walls of Jerusalem: once around the outer perimeter, once around the inner perimeter, and last, and most terrifying for her mother who doesn't like heights, around the ramparts of the City wall! We two had decided not to make a visit to Masada with the rest of the Fam Tour party, having visited Herod's mighty hilltop fortress in a previous pilgrimage. Instead, we stayed in the City, and found ourselves drawn to the Holy Sepulchre. Being outside of the tourist season, it was blissfully quiet with no queues, and so we decided to venerate Jesus' tomb. As we entered the narrow enclosure to the tomb, we needed to wait for the person currently at the site to

emerge. Imagine our surprise, when the head that popped out from the aperture was none other than that of the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams!

We were invited to sit and pray with him and his small entourage in the unusual stillness of the Basilica's rotunda. The Archbishop asked me a tough question. *'What do I consider to be the most moving act of my priestly ministry outside of presiding at the Eucharist?'* My instinctive reply? *'Washing the feet of the other.'* Even beyond ministry to the dying and the bereaved, this seemingly small and insignificant act of washing the feet of my fellow travellers on The Way never fails to move me deeply. There is something intensely honest and revelatory in the humility and intimacy of the reciprocal and equal self-giving of the one to the other. Neither party is able to hide from the other in the way we humans so often do in our daily lives. It is at once tender and profound as each gives and serves; and in so doing, we are blessed to find, reflected back from the soul of the other, the unconditional love of our Lord and Saviour.

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.



Because of the current Coronavirus outbreak, our Christian worshipping traditions during Lent and Holy Week have been upended beyond our wildest imaginings. No Maundy Thursday Eucharist at St Stephen's or Seder Meal in the home of Joyce and Michael Payne; no Foot Washing; no Midnight Vigil; no stripping of our Altars; no Good Friday Reflections at the Cross. No Easter Day celebrations in our parish churches. As I have mentioned in an earlier dispatches, my last service of Holy Communion was at St Stephen's in Sparsholt, with one churchwarden in attendance. This photograph is of the chalice and paten I used at that service, which was made for me on one of my expeditions to Jerusalem. Eleanor and I watched as a young Christian Arab craftsman beat the silver into life. I do believe this photograph reveals to us the slow light of the

Eucharist which we must keep close on our hearts in our present times. I also believe that our current experiences will draw us Christians closer to the Cross than we might at first imagine.

The events of Good Friday really start on Thursday evening, where so much is packed in. It is hard to remember that it all happens in one night! First Jesus and His friends have supper together, then they go down to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. The disciples already think the day has been long enough and they fall asleep only to be wakened by the noise of a crowd, led by their old friend, Judas, who has brought the authorities to arrest him. Jesus is taken away for a religious trial before being handed over to the civil authorities for execution. All this takes place between Thursday evening and Friday morning.

At the meal which takes place at the beginning of this eventful period, Jesus tries again to explain what He is doing. He starts the meal, by taking off his outer garments and getting down on his hands and knees and washing His friends' feet. In the hot and dusty towns of first Century Palestine, foot washing was a real necessity. No-one would dream of coming inside and sitting down for a meal without first washing off some of the filth of the outside world from their feet. But, since this was hardly a pleasant task, it was usually the job of a servant to wash his master's feet. So, here is Jesus, washing horrible, smelly feet just like a common slave. His disciples protest, belatedly offering to do the job for themselves, but Jesus says that He is performing this unpleasant function for them out of love. *'Leaders should be servants,'* He says.



Archbishop Rowan Williams washing the feet of the other

The disciples exchange puzzled glances, their eyebrows raised in exasperation. But, they are used to Jesus by now, and so they simply nod and let Him get on with it – and then eagerly head off to the dinner table. But even there, the conversation is strange! Jesus offers the bread and the wine, saying that they represent His body and His blood. Is that good or bad, the disciples wonder? Does that mean they should be

eating and drinking or not? And why will they have to do this again in memory of Jesus? Where does He think he is going now?

Finally, one of the disciples, Judas has had enough, and leaves the room to betray him. As we reflected yesterday, Jesus seems to be expecting this too. We don't quite know what motivates Judas, but it is tempting to speculate that Judas wants Jesus to be a successful leader and can't bear Him focussing on His service and death instead of fulfilling His role as the proper leader Judas has been longing for. The disciples could be forgiven on Palm Sunday for believing that Jesus is going to start a proper revolution – but no, He allows the momentum of the crowd to drain away and instead starts to wash feet like a servant.



Throughout Thursday evening and Friday morning, no-one quite seems to know what they are doing except Jesus. At every stage, things could have gone very differently. Judas might have listened to what Jesus was saying as He washed the disciples' feet. He might have realised that Jesus was doing something revolutionary, beyond Judas' wildest dreams. Pilate might have exercised proper authority with justice, rather than trying to maintain his own credibility. If, at any moment, people had really understood what was going on, they might not have condemned Jesus at all.

But they don't. They just don't see that Jesus' death is the culmination of what He has been doing all his life. The Christian story is that Jesus chose to leave heaven and share our lives here on earth, and at every stage of that sharing, He gave up some part of what could be seen as the real nature of Divinity. Instead, He chose to extinguish himself so as to identify completely with us.

Most of us, out of love, will, at some stage in our lives, give up something of ourselves and take risks for the people we love. But what Jesus gives up on the Cross is the life of God - that huge, creative, dynamic power that brings the world into being. And, as He gives it up, so He releases it. A divine exchange! Love is no longer bound up in Jesus. It is available to be shared. And that is what Easter celebrates.

So how will we respond? Yes, we have journeyed *inwards* these past few weeks, hopefully allowing ourselves time to re-connect with what it means to be the followers of Christ. But this Maundy Thursday we are preparing for a journey in faith which will last us for eternity. We don't actually need the traditions of our physical church buildings to enter into this state of grace. We need a modicum of faith and a desire to draw closer to Christ. *We are His Church!*

For us to be an Easter people, a people who will rejoice on Easter Day that Christ has risen from the dead, we now need to prepare to journey *outwards*, sharing what it means for us to have faith; taking the risk to show people around us what it means to believe in Jesus – in our words, our actions and through love. Unless we are prepared to do this, in whatever small ways we can in our daily lives, there really is no point in re-opening our churches at all.

With my love, in the Passion of Christ,

Jax

Revd Jax Machin, Rector, The Downs Benefice

Collect Prayer for Maundy Thursday

God our Father,
you have invited us to share in the supper
which your Son gave to his Church
to proclaim his death until he comes:
may he nourish us by his presence,
and unite us in his love;
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.