

Maundy Thursday

Yesterday marked the beginning of Passover: a Jewish festival of freedom from slavery. It celebrates the story in Exodus which tells how the Israelites, who were in slavery to the Egyptians, were told by God to mark their houses with the blood of a lamb to show that they belonged to God and so they were saved from death – ‘passed over’. Moses then led the Israelites on a long journey to freedom. Jewish people continue this celebration of their liberation to the present day.

John’s Gospel, chapter 13 tells us that ‘before the festival of the Passover’, Jesus and His disciples were to have a meal together. At this, His Last Supper, the day before His crucifixion, Jesus gave His disciples a new command - "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another" (John 13:34).

He demonstrated this love by washing His disciples’ feet – the lowliest task a servant had to perform. Washing the dusty feet of people in sandals could not have been pleasant, particularly when they had to walk everywhere, through dirt and dust.

John 13:2-9 "Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?” Jesus replied, “You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand.” “No,” said Peter, “you shall never wash my feet.” Jesus answered, “Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.” “Then, Lord,” Simon Peter replied, “not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!”

Lovely, impetuous Peter as usual rushes in to ask for more, but Jesus says ‘no’ this is enough.

‘Maundy’ comes from the Latin ‘mandatum’ – meaning ‘command’. The tradition of the sovereign giving ‘Maundy Money’ dates back to the reign of Edward 1st and until the death of King James II, the monarch showed their humility by also washing the feet of selected poor people. Every Holy Thursday, Pope Francis continues the tradition by washing and kissing the feet of prisoners to commemorate and follow Jesus’ actions with His disciples. This year it may not happen because of COVID-19. The pandemic has changed our lives in many ways. It means we can’t be physically close to our friends and family in the same way, we can’t hug them – or wash their feet! But we can show our obedience to Jesus’ command in other ways. Some of us are on ‘furlough’ from work, giving us extra time to do other things. Many people are taking the opportunity to do more in their neighbourhood for those who are in lockdown, the vulnerable and the sick. One positive that has come from this situation is that we are seeing ‘love in action’ more often.

Perhaps we can also remember those outside our community who are suffering at this time: those without beautiful countryside around them, those who are in prison, those in countries with no NHS to tend to them when they are sick.

Even after the pandemic is over and we return to normal life, let us continue to remember Jesus’ mandate, His new commandment, to love one another and to humble ourselves as He did, by putting others’ needs before our own, to follow the example of our Servant King.

Philippians 2:3-5 – ‘Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus.’