

Maundy Thursday

I am the Reverend Fritha Middlemiss. Today is Maundy Thursday and I am going to share a short time of worship with you. On this night Jesus had supper with his friends. He washed their feet and in his great love he gave the bread and wine as signs of his body and blood. The next day he would give up his life on the cross for us.

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest. Stay with us and be among us. Come close to us that we may come close to you. Forgive us that we may forgive one another. Renew us so that where we have failed we may begin again.

In silence we remember the wrong we have done.

Be assured that God forgives our sins and makes us holy to serve him in the world.

Here is a reading from chapter 13 of John's gospel

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' Jesus answered, 'You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.' Peter said to him, 'You will never wash my feet.' Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.' Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!' Jesus said to him, 'One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.' For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, 'Not all of you are clean.'

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. 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.

When he had gone out, Jesus said, 'Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, "Where I am going, you cannot come. I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'

'How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of him who brings good tidings,' says Isaiah. Look at your feet. Are they beautiful? Mine aren't, what with bunions, bent toes and hard skin. Why ever did the prophet not say, 'How beautiful are the lips, or the mouth?' But he chose feet and today we are remembering how Jesus chose feet. He did not hold the disciples' hands or hug or kiss them. He spoke to them and to us through their, our, feet. As Jesus and his disciples walked through Israel on those feet Jesus talked a lot about seeing their life's journey as a way of being with God and now he knows where his own feet are to take him. A friend of mine, like me and many of you, is living alone at this crisis time. She and I were talking about how to walk through Passiontide and Holy Week and then to celebrate Easter. She said that for the first time ever, though cut off physically from church, she feels as though she is really living the way of the cross, in isolation, fear for herself and her family and in efforts to do what is right and care for others. So on this hard walk our feet are particularly tired and Jesus takes them in his hands and washes them. In that upper room he did it in a remarkable way. He took off his robe that showed his status and his leadership and dressed himself in the towel of the lowliest slave and as a slave he washed his disciple's feet. Even in carefully organised Maundy Thursday services in church few people feel easy having their feet washed; they are embarrassed and uncomfortable and while having their feet washed they are vulnerable because they can't move. The disciples felt all this and more. Jesus, their leader, the one in whom they had put all their hopes of God coming in glory, was taking the position of a slave. They felt he was degrading himself but he was insistent. If they belong to Jesus and claim the love he offers they must accept the utterly strange world of God; a world in which everyone is equal, traditional hierarchies don't count and love and leadership are measured by the deepest and humblest service. For much of my life I've talked about God's upside down world; of a love that shows no distinction, that exalts the humble; of citizens of God's kingdom who show their loyalty through acts of service. I've known many people who've lived like that but it's taken this pandemic through which we are living to show me that the whole of society can shift towards God's way. First we started honouring low-paid health workers and carers, then brave shop workers and post and bin men and women. We began to understand how much we depend on each other so that now armies of volunteers in everything from the highest scientific research to delivering food supplies to isolated people, are joining to serve society. How can we ensure that this glimpse of God's Kingdom in the middle of danger and sadness, remains after the pandemic ends? Jesus gave very few directions and orders in his life but on this night he issued three, which is why we call today Maundy Thursday. It means commandment Thursday. Jesus commanded that we love each other as he had loved us; told us that we ought to wash one another's feet and then told us to 'do this in remembrance' of him, that is, to take the bread of his body and the wine of his blood, the signs of his utter self sacrifice, and so bring his life into being in our own lives. That was the way Jesus had walked. That is the way he told us to walk. At the end of Matthew's Gospel two women are the first people to meet the risen Christ. Perhaps it is no wonder that it was his feet they grasped when they fell and worshiped him.

Let us pray together now.

Lord Jesus Christ, you have taught us that what we do for the least of our brothers and sisters we do for you. Give us the will to be the servant of others as you were the servant of all.

Loving god, may your church be committed to follow Christ's example of love and service and at this time of crisis strengthen it to offer prayer and love in new ways.

We pray to you for our nation and its leaders. Give them strength and wisdom to serve the country now and beyond this crisis.

We pray for the Heart of England parishes, for all our friends and neighbours. Comfort those living alone and afraid, support those who are ill and care for people in financial hardship. Show us how to help them in your name.

We ask for comfort for those who face death alone and for people who cannot mark the end of loved ones' lives as they would wish. Let them know that you are with them.

For all who have died we ask that they may share your risen life and give us too a glimpse of your glory.

Please join me now to say the Lord's prayer.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever, Amen.

Finally, let us commit ourselves to continue in God's service.

Look at your hands, see the touch and the tenderness – God's own for the world.

Look at your feet, see the path and the direction – God's own for the world.

Look at your heart, see the fire and the love – God's own for the world.

Look at the cross, see God's Son and Saviour – God's own for the world.

This is God's world, and we will serve God in it.

Tomorrow is Good Friday when we will keep watch in Christ's last hours.

Christ was obedient unto death. Go in peace.