



## Washing feet

A sermon by Revd Richard Carter

The last days in a person's life are often never forgotten. After their death people will recall the things they said, the actions they did and each word and action will be imbued with significance. Last week Catherine Duce, our former pastoral assistant's mother, Philippa, died- she had cancer and had known for about a year that she did not have long to live. On the last night of her life in hospital she asked to see her grandchildren. Cath said that it was amazing to see her because although she was very weak and in pain she was gathering together all her last strength so that her grandchildren would not be frightened and be able to treasure this last memory of her. From her bed she gave them a gift of life membership to the National Trust. I have kept thinking of that action since Cath told me. It sums up so much about Philippa- her love for her grandchildren, her love for creation and the beauty of the countryside, but more than that as though in this simple action she was handing that love onto them so that they might be bearers of that same gift, that same grace - she was in the most beautiful way entrusting the nation into these young hands. Giving them her trust, the nation's trust, and showing them that they were the inheritors and custodians of the things of God. Of course they will not realise that immediately, although they went out of the room proudly holding onto their gold National Trust badges. But sacramental actions speak beyond the immediate moment and the meaning of the symbol continues to be revealed in the events of our lives. It is only later that we may realise the eternal nature of the gift we have been given. A gift that goes on and on revealing itself.

A good teacher knows that it is better to show rather than to tell. And Jesus is the best teacher of all. Notice how in the last days of his life he speaks very little. But each one of his actions speaks-speaks beyond time and place and beyond his immediate disciples. Jesus shows us the meaning of his message in a way which will be branded on the collective memory of his followers forever. Everything that Jesus does in this last week is going to become a primordial revelation for our Christian community from then until now. It is going to give us our identity, it's going to show us who this Jesus Christ is – more than that it is going to show us the meaning of God. If we wanted to express God not in words but in unforgettable actions how would we do it? Well this is the way Jesus expresses all that God is:

He rides into Jerusalem the holy city on a donkey.

He overturns the money changers tables in the temple.

He washes his disciples' feet.

At a last supper he breaks bread and tells them that this is his body, he shares wine and says that this is his blood.

He prays in a garden.

He allows his betrayer to kiss him.

He stands before his accusers and never says a word.

He is beaten and mocked.

He is crowned with thorns.  
He carries his cross, and someone carries it for him.  
He is nailed to a cross and his arms are stretched out to the world.  
He is crucified.

His last words collected together are not long theological treatises they are these seven short sentences each one to be pondered forever.

The disciples would hold onto those memories. In those days there was no Facebook page or What's App These are the memories that were written on the hearts of his followers as they told again and again the story of Jesus Christ. These were the memories that held the community together, gave it its identity and meaning- connected to the flesh and blood experience of Jesus present among them. 2000 later we are still re-enacting that same drama- using those same actions to make Christ really present. We did it last Sunday- Palm Sunday, we will do it tonight, and tomorrow and very early in the morning on Easter Day. Let us just remind ourselves of these actions, so as they do not slip past as unawares. Let us pay attention so that like all powerful symbols they become doors rather than oft repeated dead rituals or traditions of the past. Peter Brook the great contemporary theatre director says that a true symbol "is hard and clear, it cuts ever deeper, it explodes through the crust and appearance of our world so that we see the molten lava of creation at work."

During supper Jesus gets up from the table, takes off his outer robe, ties a robe around himself and then he pours water into a basin and begins to wash his disciples' feet. It is difficult for Simon Peter to accept this action. This washing confronts and challenges. It turns the relationship of master and disciple upside-down. But more than that it is a disarmingly intimate action. And our exposed feet somehow illustrate our human vulnerability. I always remember a group of Australian army soldiers who I witnessed taking off their military boots and socks in order to enter church which was the tradition of the culture of Melanesia. Without shoes and socks walking down the coral path these tough soldiers trained for the battlefield were suddenly children again hopping awkwardly over the choral like children by the seaside. Washing the feet of those in one's community feels very humbling, not because you yourself are humble but because the community has allowed you to do this- allowed you to see the vulnerability we all fear and to experience the tenderness we, with our stiff upper lip or should I say stiff lower toes, find it difficult to receive.

This liturgical action has been rediscovered recently and allowed to take a more prominent liturgical place in our church. Jean Vanier discovered how special this action was in the community life of L'Arche-uniting one another and discovering what it means to both serve and be served. He said that this foot washing creates community. Jean Vanier could get away with such actions but I read that when Rowan Williams reintroduced the practice to Canterbury when he was Archbishop in 2003 many regarded it as rather strange behaviour and the Daily Telegraph commented that archivists could find no record of previous archbishops washing feet! But this was not simply a Rowan eccentricity- it was a sacramental sign- a sign of what the church must be both in giving and receiving both in serving and having the humility to allow oneself to be served and open to God's grace. A few weeks after being elected Pope, Pope Francis also caused controversy by washing feet when visiting a young offender's prison in Rome during Holy Week. He washed the feet of both young men and women. It was more than a sign of a new model of papacy it was a sign of the nature of God's love both in the washing and the being washed. Last January when John

Vanier was invited to address the Primates of the Anglican Communion meeting together for their fraught and tense discussions about human sexuality and with the future unity of the Anglican Communion at stake- John Vanier invited them to wash each other's feet. Vanier said that: "gestures sometimes speak louder or more lastingly than words" Indeed although the words remained divided the Primates Meeting did actually decide "to walk together" Perhaps their recently bathed feet had discovered a wisdom that it will take the rest of their bodies and minds a while longer to understand. So let the washing of feet do the talking.

Tonight we come together to experience for ourselves the things that took place the night before Jesus died. The last things. The washing of feet- the offering of bread and wine. Perhaps it is better not to say any more about the things that Jesus did but to let those actions speak for themselves. And may these sacramental actions go on revealing their truths to us and make Christ present here and now.