



Revd Ro's Reflection on The Fifth Sunday of Easter

Year C 2022

John 13.31-35

Acts 11.1-18

Our gospel reading for this Sunday begins with the ominous words, 'When he had gone out,' just as the cockerel, or the charcoal fire on the beach by the Sea of Galilee takes us back to the betrayal of Jesus by Peter on that fateful evening in the courtyard, so these words take us to the betrayal by Judas. Chapter 13 of John's gospel is hugely significant; the disciples are gathered together with Jesus as he celebrates their Last Supper together. They are, we are told, reclining; that is the way the meal would have been shared, not sitting at a table as is portrayed in many paintings of the event.

²³ 'One of his disciples—the one whom Jesus loved—was reclining next to him.' The disciple of whom Jesus was particularly fond is always thought to be St John. Peter of course, recognising the incongruity of his Lord and master taking on the role of a slave, cannot bear to think Jesus will demean himself to wash his feet. 'I am not worthy,' are words that have echoed down the ages and that we all think. Peter still has a great deal to learn about true greatness and humility. Jesus tells him unless I wash you you have no share with me and there Peter, impulsive as ever, says 'Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!' He still does not understand but Jesus' words are ominous,

'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.' ¹¹For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, 'Not all of you are clean.'

Of course looking back on the event we understand the significance of those words; so does St. John as he writes this but the disciples were confused. They could not conceive of what those words really meant. Only one man at that meal heard the words and understood. Later Jesus is more specific,

'Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, 'Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me.' ²²The disciples looked at one another; uncertain of whom he was speaking. '

It is interesting to note that Peter, who is not usually backward to come forward, doesn't ask Jesus directly who he means; instead he turns to John and asks him to ask Jesus. Jesus' reply is again significant,

²⁶ 'Jesus answered, 'It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.' Yes that is an obvious and outward sign but it may have a deeper significance than that. At a Seder meal the 'sop' the piece of bread is dipped into the wine and often given to the person of whom the leader is most fond. It would be a sign of love or friendship. Here the piece of bread is given to Judas, even now at this awful time Jesus' love is so deep he can signal forgiveness. It compares to his words uttered as the nails are being driven in, 'Father forgive them because they do not know what they are doing.'

'So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot. ²⁷After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, 'Do quickly what you are going to do.'

We are told that Judas went out, 'And it was night.'

Judas leaves the disciples; he turns his back on God and goes into the night. The powers of darkness are at work and evil is unleashed. Jesus knows exactly what is to happen; this is his destiny, for this he came. Now begins what is known as the 'farewell discourse' and it is followed in chapter seventeen by Jesus' great prayer for the disciples. Our reading for this morning is inextricably linked to what has gone before, not only in the behaviour of Judas but in Jesus' explanation of the nature of love, of service and of leadership and indeed his destiny. Jesus will soon be gone from them. They must take up the mantle but they must understand how to exercise the position which is to be theirs.

Firstly the nature of service,

¹² '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? ¹³ You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵For I have set you an example that you also should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶ Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. ¹⁷If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.'

This is true leadership, one based on sincere care for those under you. Not only care is needed but service. Jesus is human and divine as it says in the first paragraph of John's gospel

¹ 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.'

But we remember the words of the hymn, 'Hands that flung stars into space, to cruel nails surrendered.' Ultimately Jesus would give his life in love for humanity. What he has just done in the upper room symbolised love and service and humility. 'Lord of infinity stooping so tenderly, kneels in humility and washes our feet.'

It is so easy if you have power to abuse it, to think of yourself as the be all and end all. To take that power and use it for your own ends to achieve what you want. We see the extremes of this in what is going on in the world today. But abuse of power can happen at the very basic level and Jesus is warning the leaders of the early church. Jesus, by his teaching and example shows real nobility. His first disciples must learn now to exercise their roles in love. It is awful when abuse of power takes a hold in the church of Jesus Christ as we see it has done looking back over the ages.

When I was ordained in Lichfield Cathedral almost twenty years ago, the archdeacon who preached gave us all a present. Under our seat was a parcel and he asked us to unwrap them there. We all received a white towel, 'These are to remind you that you are servants of the servant who washed the feet of twelve poor men, one of whom was Judas.' Those towels were a symbol of service and of the sort of leadership that was expected. I still have that towel and I can still hear those words. What Jesus shows is the nature of love, the love that serves, and the love that cares. There must be no show, no artifice, and no room for power seeking in real love. Love is sensitive to the needs of others, the feelings of others. Jesus sums this up in his great commandment which closes today's reading.

³⁴ 'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'

I have said that this chapter begins Jesus' 'farewell discourse'

³³ '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."

The disciples know that Jesus is going to leave them; they must have an idea that it may be because of a confrontation with the authorities and they are aware of danger but they are still mystified by his words.

Throughout his ministry Jesus is active, he prays, he heals, he teaches. From his arrest in the garden Jesus has things done to him but he is still in control. He has a nobility of bearing, this is his destiny, and the purposes of God are being acted out in him. It is summed up by his answer to Pilate, 'Pilate therefore said to him, "Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?" Jesus answered him, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above;"

Jesus is 'obedient to death, even death on a cross.' Jesus is the saviour of the world and his fight on Calvary will lead to his final victory over evil and sin. It is his crowning as King, that mocking title 'Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews' was so true but he is King of the universe and reigns with his Father.

'Jesus said, 'Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³²If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once.'

His time is near and he says so to the disciples as soon as Judas goes out into the night. Chapter thirteen tells of two betrayals, Judas' and at the end Peter's. Peter tells Jesus he will go to death with him and Jesus looks quietly at him and foretells the awful truth. But Peter and Judas are so different, Judas gives into evil. His action is considered, thought out, it is true betrayal. Peter is motivated by such love of his Lord, sadly the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak in that instance. His is a failure that can be reclaimed and that is why Peter can go on to be the rock man who will lead the Christians forward.

When we look at the cross we see Jesus, God and man winning the victory through love. On Easter Sunday death is conquered forever. We know that ultimately love will triumph over evil. Evil can destroy, it can never create, it can never give life, only God can do that.

In this passage Jesus gives his great commandment, to love. He has lived it out and he will love to the end. This is what the disciples are told to do. Those words of Jesus, spoken to the disciples at the Last Supper are spoken to every single one of us.

When we look at our reading from the Acts of the Apostles in the light of what we have just read of Jesus' words in the upper room instructing the disciples to make love their guide, we can't fail to notice the irony.

¹ 'Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. ²So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticised him, ³saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?"

It is a mistake to think that everything in the early church was fine and dandy and it was only afterwards that things started to go pear shaped! Right from the beginning there was dissension, criticism and carping. They still had a lot to learn. The words of the disciples here sound so much like the Pharisees who criticised Jesus for eating with so-called sinners and outcasts. Jesus roundly tells them that there is more rejoicing over one lost sheep than twenty who are righteous, or think they are!

This passage always reminds me of that film, 'Whistle Down the Wind'. The three children, who think they have Jesus in their barn tell the others they can't come. One little girl speaks for us all when she says. 'Oh yes we can, we can see Jesus if we want to, he's not your private property!' This is a lesson the disciples had yet to learn. You would think that the disciples would have understood by now that Jesus was not simply for the Jews, their private property, but for all humanity. Still they seem to think that the believers must be from Jewish ranks. Later of course there will be the belief that Gentiles must adopt Jewish customs and laws. There is a new lesson to be learned now, Christianity is for all people. Certainly new Christians must see their roots in the Jewish scriptures, they must understand Jesus is the Messiah foretold by the prophets, but they do not have to change to adopt Jewish ways or laws. The rejection of Gentiles was terrible so God acts.

Often a reading has to be put into context, but Peter explains exactly what had happened as he addresses the disciples who are criticising him for mixing with Gentiles. He has to make them understand how momentous the episode was. His explanation echoes chapter ten almost exactly. Peter had been in Joppa staying with Simon the tanner. While praying on the roof of the house he had this now famous vision. Jewish food laws were very strict and carefully delineated in law. So too of course were the rules about food and hygiene. Peter is praying and this vision must have been like a bolt out of the blue. It turned his ingrained beliefs upside down. He sees all sorts of beasts and reptiles, all 'unclean' and is told to eat them. No wonder he replies with the shocked retort, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' ⁹But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.'

The reply is clear, never question what God tells you. We must remember too that the law forbade Jews from eating with Gentiles. While Peter is having this vision in Joppa in Caesarea there was a man called Cornelius, he was a centurion. He was, we are told, 'a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God.' Cornelius has a vision telling him to send for Peter. Cornelius of course is a Gentile. Yet Peter goes and he preaches the word of God to Cornelius and all the Gentiles gathered there. Peter makes it clear that under Jewish law he should not be there but because of the vision God has made it quite clear it is not up to Peter but to God what is profane. Jesus is the saviour of humanity; the good news is for all. ^{10.34} 'Then Peter began to speak to them: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him'.

Peter gives the message of Jesus to Cornelius and his household; it is worth reading his explanation too. The effect is amazing,

^{10.44} ‘While Peter was still speaking; the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. ⁴⁵The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, ⁴⁶for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God.’ The Holy Spirit descends upon these Gentiles as it did on the first believers in the upper room. They react by exhibiting the gifts of the Spirit. There can be no doubt now as to God’s intentions and as Peter says to the Jews who are with him, no one can refuse baptism to anyone whom God has given his Spirit to! All are welcome who turn to Jesus as Lord and try to live in his way. All this Peter relates to the apostles and believers who have questioned his behaviour and he quotes Jesus Christ’s own words too.

^{11.16} ‘And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, ‘John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.’ ¹⁷ If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?’ ¹⁸When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, ‘Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.’

It is made clear here that both Jews and Gentiles are called. All are welcome. ‘Repent of your sin and turn to Christ,’ is what is required of all of us. All artificial barriers are broken down in Jesus. God loves us all equally, status, position, race nor anything else matters a jot. All are called; Jesus died and rose for all humanity. If we can say ‘I turn to Christ’ and try to live in his way he welcomes us. There is no partiality, no artificial barrier to God’s love. This is a lesson the disciples had to learn. It is a lesson we all have to learn. It is all encapsulated in Jesus’ great commandment. ‘Love one another as I have loved you.’

I always finish with a quotation and this is a blessing which is sometimes used to close a compline.

May God bless us that in us may be found love and humility, obedience and thanksgiving, discipline, gentleness and peace.

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