

Maundy Thursday 2014

“Preach the Gospel, and if necessary, use words”.

These words are traditionally attributed to St Francis of Assisi.

Tonight we do exactly that: we preach the Gospel through our actions, through washing feet (or hands) and through making Eucharist in commemoration of that Last Supper on the night Jesus was betrayed.

In our Gospel reading, John’s tells us of the final evening that Jesus spent with his disciples. John tells us of two dramatic and highly meaningful actions of Jesus: footwashing (combined with the instruction to his followers ‘So ought you to wash one another’s feet’); and breaking bread and drinking wine (combined with the instruction ‘Do this in remembrance of me’).

I heard Bishop Gordon Mursell speak at last year’s Diocesan clergy conference on footwashing as part of his consideration of John chapters 13 to 17, known as the Farewell Discourses.

He made the point that in these long discourses, Jesus was preparing his disciples for their mission to preach the Gospel to the world. BUT **BEFORE** any **words** are said, Jesus washes the disciples’ feet; and **then** says they should do the same for others. Jesus did this, Bishop Mursell said, firstly to assure all them that they are loved and accepted; and then to insist that they love and accept others.

What I want you to notice tonight, is that Jesus washed the feet of **all** of the disciples including Peter (who denied him) and Judas (who betrayed him), expressing to them that they too are loved and accepted along with the others. The love and acceptance of Jesus are unconditional, there are no strings attached. The love and acceptance of Jesus is not utilitarian; no return is expected for them. **Foot-washing is modelling unconditional love.**

In asking us to do this for one another, Jesus is asking us to model, for all the world to see, God’s unconditional love and acceptance... and to make it our own. The love and acceptance we model should have no strings attached. To remind us of this, we need to wash one another’s feet.

Our message to each other, clearly visible to the world outside is: No matter how un-loved and un-worthy you may feel, Jesus loves you and accepts you unconditionally; and we do too!

What more powerful and attractive message can there be than the limitless love of God mirrored in us his Church! It seems to me that most Churches have stopped washing the feet of the Peter’s and the Judases among them; and some Churches have got close to not washing the feet of anyone who thinks differently from them.

We need to re-learn footwashing, to become unconditionally loving and accepting of our fellow disciples.

In the act of foot-washing Jesus preached the Gospel without using words. Indeed all social action should begin in this way; with humble, unconditional service before words are spoken. Christians do have to earn the right to speak up for their Lord; and they earn that right through their actions, through their expressions of the unconditional love and acceptance of God in Jesus. Social action is an integral part of our preaching the Gospel, the part without or before the words.

Through our social action, we too *‘Preach the Gospel, and if necessary, use words’.*

In a way, the problem with the Last Supper, that first Eucharist, is that *too many words* have been spoken about it! Yet the heart of the Eucharistic action is a **wordless** reality; our union with God. In the tokens of bread and wine, the intimacy of our union with God is expressed. If footwashing is modelling **unconditional love**, then the Eucharist is modelling our **union** with God himself.

The one **follows** the other. Following the unconditional love and acceptance at the heart of the footwashing, comes the intimacy of our union with God.

Particularly tonight, it is a union to be experienced rather than talked about. It is Good News in its purest form. In our Eucharist tonight, we preach the Gospel, and so far as is necessary for the liturgy, we use words. Tonight let us, allow the Gospel, the good news, of our Eucharistic union with God speak for itself.

There aren't many words after this service ends.

This evening marks the beginning of the Great Three Days (the Tri-Duum), most of which the Church spends in meditation or quiet contemplation. What happens here in Church is actually structured as a single event with spaces to go home and reflect. Services begin and end in silence.

We watch with Christ in the garden of Gethsemane .

We pray at the foot of the Cross.

We keep vigil .

And (if you want to see my favourite part, you'll have to go to St Albans at 8pm on Saturday night) we rehearse the entire history of the salvation of the Universe in the Service of New Light, which marks the beginning of our resurrection joy of Easter. And, like the dawn chorus of birds, chatter and joy returns to the Church, after darkness and sobriety.

These Great Three days are characterised by quietness. It is our **actions** in the Church in these Great Three Days that speak volumes, rather than our words.

We again '*Preach the Gospel, and only if necessary, we use words*'.

Our hope is to draw ourselves and others into a deeper, more all-embracing union with God, mediated In the Eucharist, and in his unconditional love and acceptance of us all.

Our hope is that our footwashing (indeed all our social action) will lead folk to union with the God who loves them, and loves us, unconditionally.

So let us tonight and in the days ahead '***Preach the Gospel, and only if necessary, use words***'.

Amen.