

## Maundy Thursday - 'We have a King with a bowl and towel'. (Sarah Penfold)

Some years ago, I was on the Isle of Wight for a weekend with some friends and three of us went to the local church on the Sunday morning. As we went in, I was handed a large ice cream tub and a wooden spoon. The sidesman assured me that I would know what to do and when. My friends giggled. I just wondered how he knew that I was the one who would join in with whatever it was I had to do.

But then why did the man supervising removal of a tree, very much in the wrong place, from our garden ask me, 'Are you a Christian?'. I was so surprised that I failed to find out why he asked.

It turned out that the tub and spoon were a makeshift drum to join a makeshift orchestra to accompany one of the hymns – 'We have a King who rides a donkey'. Those of you who are familiar will know that it is sung to the tune of 'What shall we do with the drunken sailor', and is plum for clapping, foot stamping, jangling car keys and ice cream tub drums. You can find the words in the orange hymn book that we use at St John's and Christ the King.

Disappointingly it is in the section marked 'Children's' hymns. Just because it contains no dauntingly academic theology doesn't make it infantile. It is a great sing for congregations of all ages, no organ or tune books needed.

It is verse five that has lodged itself in my memory bank. 'We have a King with a bowl and towel'.

For some years now I have played the part of Jesus in our Easter Journey presentation to year 5 children from local schools. (Ten-year-olds in old money) This involves washing the feet of the people playing the disciples. It is a strange thing to do. Like Jesus I remove my outer garment. Although I am still wearing a considerable number of clothes, and possibly due to the chill of the ambient air in the church, I feel vulnerable. I pour the water into the bowl. Careful now, don't spill it. And I kneel at their feet. Like Jesus I am washing the feet of my friends. Unlike Jesus I am washing feet that have showered that morning and have been wearing clean socks. It is just a gesture. But I am conscious of the need to be gentle around corns and blisters. Imagine the cuts and callouses on feet that walked miles each day in ill-fitting sandals. And despite knowing that it won't happen I am conscious how easy it would be for one of them to kick me in the face.

The gospel tells us that Jesus dried their feet with the towel. Many of us will remember drying the feet of a baby wriggling damply on our laps. Careful now between the toes. Don't want to incur the disapproval of Grandma or the Health Visitor. There is an unnatural intimacy about drying someone else's feet.

It is easy to see why this job was reserved for the lowliest slave and therefore why Jesus chose it to demonstrate how we should serve each other. I have been trying to think of the equivalent jobs today. Perhaps we have a King with a mop and bucket, we have a King with hand sanitiser, we have a King who puts the bins out. My creativity has been stunted by the need to fit the words to the tune. We have a King who does what others avoid doing. Servant King is Jesus.

There are many different pictures of service, we will each have our own. And it is worth remembering that sometimes the best way to be of service to someone is not to do something for them but to help, encourage or push them into doing it themselves. Churches are full of people who didn't think they could stand up and read in public, or explain the Easter story to a class from a local school, but encouraged by fellowship and empowered by the Spirit found that they could.

The prayer for growth that we use at Parish Prayers on a Saturday includes the plea to help our church to grow in service to our local community. We have been thinking about it as a parish during Lent, but there is also the personal dimension. We have not been thinking of things for 'them' to do, but for 'us' to do. There will be plenty of opportunity for each of us to park our fears and become involved with the actions identified. To show that as Christians we exist not just for our own little clan but for the wider community.

Of course, we hear of so many needs and realise that we cannot meet them all. Sometimes what we can do may feel very small and insignificant, but it is often those little things which can brighten someone's day and leave them feeling less forgotten. Over the last year we have learned to value a smile or a 'Good morning' from a stranger in a way that we might not have done previously. Jesus did not manage to help everyone, and reminds us that the poor will always be with us. Paul has reminded us recently that speaking up can be as important as doing.

Service can be defined as showing love. Tom Wright describes love as 'the badge that the Christian community wears before the watching world'. While it is not good to become obsessed with the picture we paint to outsiders we do well to consider whether the impression we make is one that we are happy about. Will people be able to tell that we are Christians without us wearing badges or making sure that we are seen entering church on Sunday? What signs might there be? Will it just be obvious? What did the man cutting down our tree notice?

We can all make our own list, but to get you started:

A willingness to treat everybody the same

A consideration for the environment

A willingness to listen more than talk (hence two ears and only one mouth!)

A willingness to consider other people's viewpoints

Jesus told his disciples that they would be recognised as such by their love for each other. Wouldn't we like the same to be true for us? How will we let our love show? There is not a lot of need for foot washing in Shirley, but a sympathetic ear over a cup of tea, or noticing that someone is struggling to reach the top shelf in the supermarket and reaching up for them?

The final verse of that hymn asks 'What shall we do with our life this morning?'

Well. What shall we do?

The only thing stopping us is ourselves.