

## **Maundy Thursday**

**Exodus 12:1-14**

**I Corinthians 11:23-26**

**John 13:1-17, 31-35**

Jesus' followers had gathered for a special occasion. They were preparing for Passover, a time to remember their history and their heritage, and to reinforce their identity. They were God's people doing what God's people had been told to do for generations. It was a time of looking to the past with gratitude and looking to the future with hope.

For God's people, their hopes for the future were emboldened by their past. At Passover, the story of the Exodus would be told – that epic tale of how God had orchestrated the rescue of the Israelite slaves out of their suffering and captivity by Pharaoh in Egypt. And at this Passover, the people in Jerusalem would have been hoping for God to return to rescue them from the occupation and oppression of Rome and its Emperor.

But this particular gathering was different – because amongst this group of Jewish men and women was Jesus, and in Jesus they had come to believe that the future they so desperately desired - their release, their freedom, and with them a restored relationship with God, was at the very point of being inaugurated.

Jesus himself had prepared for this moment. It was during supper that he knew that the Father, from whom he had come, and to whom he was going, had given *all things into his hands*. And so it would be on this very night that the events which begin his journey back to the Father were about to get under way.

The night was approaching, under the devil's influence Judas was poised, and so Jesus had but a little time to impart to his followers what they needed to know and do when he was no longer with them physically. Whether they could understand or handle it, only time would tell.

To show them he used those very hands into which God had placed all things.

If the disciples thought they knew what Jesus was about to do, because they knew this ritual so well, then they were surprised. Jesus would have started in the normal way, by breaking the bread and distributing a piece to each person, they would have surely done this many times - in giving them that piece of bread he's giving them God's blessing. Receiving the bread they all felt united with one another and with God.

But this time Jesus adds words that give a new and unexpected meaning to his gesture as he hands over the bread he says *this is my body that is for you*. He was handing over himself to them, what must they have thought hearing these words for the first time?

He then holds in his hands the cup of wine, gives thanks and they would be expecting him to drink from it and then signal them to drink their own cups. But that evening Jesus changes the ritual again and invites his disciples to drink from just a single cup – his own. They all share the cup and wine that Jesus has blessed. A new community had been inaugurated. And now they needed to know how they were to live in this new community.

He wants this community to remember him always, as one who committed to serving them. He will always be the one who serves and the one who was offered his life and death for them, the servant of all.

So Jesus goes on and uses his hands in yet another unexpected way. As he got up then began to wash his disciples' feet. It is another unusual gesture, it was unthinkable that anyone at a festival meal, especially the host, should do something which was left to the servants or slaves. By doing this Jesus performs the duties of a slave. When he was doing this, perhaps they

remembered his words ‘whoever wishes to be first among you must be slaves of all’.

Here Jesus says this but by using actions. He became a servant and slave for all of them. And of course, within a few hours, his hands, which he had been used to break bread, to bless, to heal, to liberate, to fling stars into space and to serve others, were to have nails mercilessly driven through them, fixing them to a cross, a punishment reserved especially for slaves.

We who have gathered tonight for this special occasion are part of that same community inaugurated by Jesus. Tonight, we are reminded of this when we receive into our hands the bread and wine which he called his body and blood, and, if you choose, by having your hands washed as a reminder of his instructions to use your hands in his service.

What is he asking you to do with them? He continues to surprise us, to act in strange ways, so be prepared to be put on the spot like Peter was.

Because we are followers of that same Jesus, and like those first disciples, he has instructed us to remember him, believe in him, trust him, love him and imitate him. Amen.

Rev'd Richard Haynes – Maundy Thursday 2024