

Maundy Thursday

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Maundy Thursday 2024 – John 13 1–17, 31b–35

The Last Supper that we read about in John's Gospel happens on a different day from the Last Supper stories in the other Gospels. (Mt 26.17ff, Mk 14 12ff and Lk 22.7ff) For them, it's the Passover meal. But in John, the Passover was not going to be eaten until the following evening – after Jesus' crucifixion. (cf Jn 19.31f)

So on Maundy Thursday, the choice of John's Gospel suspends the symbolism of Jesus as the sacrificial lamb which is so present in the other Gospels, and instead, we're asked to focus on some of his final teachings.

Those teachings are given in the best possible way – first by example, and only then with words.

First, Jesus washes his friends' feet – the steady friends and the flaky ones. He does this to show that genuine leadership in the community of Jesus' followers is expressed not through domination but through humble service.

And while they, and we, are still in shock at what's happened, then he says that that humble service is something we are not to express out of a sense of duty. It's only real when it springs from genuine love; like his love for us.

We still find footwashing confronting and awkward. As it's happening, maybe we're a bit too bewildered about what it means to think about this as our love for each other – never mind for strangers.

Maybe we're just meant to go ahead and do humble service, and over the years, to discover in ourselves that it's the way we

love. Maybe it does that for us.

I must say I puzzle about how we teach this to our children and to people exploring Christian faith. I can see no other way than involving them in it directly. I'm sure some young people might find it pretty gross. You have to be careful who you pair them up with. And people from some other cultures have very strong views about feet and heads.

We've just seen Jesus do what the servant of a middle-eastern household was expected to do for guests. What's an equivalent today? Take a job below your station? Do community service? Volunteer for something you find embarrassing? Is this how we are to discover the love of Christ within us?

I don't think we're meant to overthink this. Self-forgetting for the sake of others seems to be a good starting point. So maybe this is where I should stop talking as we prepare to answer Jesus' call, when he said to us – *if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.* Amen.