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## **Maundy Thursday 2018**

Simon Peter

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another'

Words of Jesus after he has washed the disciples feet.

In some ways, this passage needs some historical explanation. That it would have been normal for a servant to wash the feet of visitors arriving to the house. But in other ways we need no explanation at all. We instinctively know what foot washing means. In any culture, in any place, it is a humble act. Stooping down, of washing another person, it is not the act of kings or princes; it is the act of those who serve.

And yet, that is what Jesus does. At this key moment, the last meal with his friends, before Judas leaves, Jesus washes his disciple's feet. And as he does so, he explains what he is doing and why he is doing it 'You call me teacher and Lord- and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your teacher and Lord have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet'. He goes on at the end of the passage with some of the most famous words in the gospel of John 'a new commandment I give to you that you love one another as I have loved you.

Jesus is saying goodbye and giving the disciples the gift of each other.

As well as thinking about the emotional and practical support of those he is leaving behind, Jesus has also already chosen the person who will lead his church. In Matthew, Jesus tells Simon Peter 'you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of hades shall not prevail against it'.

Many would say that Peter is an odd choice. He tends to say the wrong thing. He is belligerent and is often not prepared to co operate without several questions first. Today's reading is a good example. Everyone else, presumably, lets Jesus get on and wash their feet, but not Peter. He needs to understand why this is happening. What's going on, what does it mean, before he is prepared to have his feet washed. Finally, it is Peter who denies Jesus three times before the cock crowed.

Jesus knew Peter better than Peter knew himself, he knew this was going to happen. And yet he chose him anyway.

Perhaps we get a glimpse of why Jesus chose Peter in the very last scene between them, right at the end of John's gospel. The resurrection has happened. Jesus, Peter, and the other disciples are having breakfast by the side of the lake and Jesus asks Simon Peter

'Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these'

'Simon says 'yes lord, you know that I love you'



Jesus says 'tend my sheep'

They have this exchange three times, the same number of times that Peter denied Jesus. Jesus is giving Peter the chance to say he's sorry and receive forgiveness.

Jesus saw in Peter a man who really loved him, and a man who was able to accept forgiveness for the past and move on with his ministry. Through that love Peter's belligerence, passion, and energy would become the force which would lead the the early church. The book of Acts, which chronicles the very beginnings of the church is dominated by Peter. It is Peter who, full of the Holy Spirit speaks to the people on the day of Pentecost and is established as the first Christian leader.

Peter offers himself wholly to Jesus, and Jesus uses all that he is, his strengths and his weaknesses to establish his church.

And those of us from Episcopal churches, churches with Bishops have a particular connection with Simon Peter. The church believes that Bishops are consecrated in the line of apostolic succession which dates back to Peter himself. So Peter blessed the first church leaders and they blessed the next one and so on.

When my brothers and I were teenagers, our Dad became a Bishop. I remember the three of us sitting with our Mum in the front row at York Minster waiting for the consecration to begin. The minster was packed and it was clearly going to be a very grand affair. I was going through a particularly grumpy teenage phase and was refusing to be impressed 'it seems a lot of fuss', I remarked, 'its only Dad'. My little brother thought about that and said 'yes, but those Bishops are going to bless Dad, and bishops blessed them all the way back to Peter, don't you think that's kind of holy?' It was a bit galling to be put in my place by the flawless ecclesiology of a 13 year old.

And of course, the line of apostolic succession is not just about Bishops. At the service of Confirmation, the Bishop confirms each candidate by the laying on of hands, a sign that we are all part of the church dating back to Peter and the first apostles, and we are charged as they were with its care and its flourishing in our own generation.

Peter was the rock on which Jesus built his church, and the gates of Hades have not prevailed against it. This morning, Chris gave me a tour of your church, and showed me how, over the centuries, Lancaster Priory has been added to, developed, as new generations of Christians have shaped it to their needs and stamped their identity here. In these stones are the story of the Christian Community in Lancaster over the last 1500 years, handed down to us by Christians who have worshipped here, who have carried the flame of faith from one generation to another.

And so today, as we remember Simon Peter, the imperfect and flawed rock on which Jesus built his church, we give thanks for the church of which we are apart, for the Christian community which has told the story of God's love from the time of Peter until today.

As we share bread and wine with one another this evening, we give thanks for the gift of Christian community, in all its joys and challenges, so that with Peter, the disciples, and the church throughout the ages, we can share his love and follow him. Amen