

Holy Communion Maundy Thursday John 13:1-17

'Actions speak louder than words' discuss. Do you agree that 'actions speak louder than words,' or would your answer be in the fine Anglican tradition of, 'Well 'yes and no''. The reading in John's Gospel comes just before those words we know so well, words we struggle to live by 'Love one another as I have loved you'. According to John, these are part of Jesus' final words to the disciples before his death – words he has lived out and shown us in his actions and words he will live out by doing God's will, in his death. But Jesus, doesn't only have *words* for his disciples, he has actions – he *shows* them what he means– he demonstrates exactly what he wants of his disciples – exactly how they are to behave after he has died. Whether you agree or disagree with the saying 'Actions speak louder than words', we all need actions as well as words if we are to understand how to behave.

Children (and adults too) will only listen to someone giving advice if they respect that person's behaviour. Many a Primary Headteacher has had a parent telling them in a VERY loud voice that they are worried about their child because he shouts at home all the time. We need good models if we are to serve God, and do God's will. Here, Jesus, just before his arrest, is modelling for us, how to do God's will.

So what are these actions of Jesus? Here we are on Maundy Thursday, the night we remember the night of the last supper but in John's gospel, there is no explicit meal: we don't have those words that have become precious to so many of us over the years of 'This is my body' and 'this is my blood' – we have instead a scene of action – the scene of Jesus washing the disciples' feet. In 1st century Palestine, everyone washed their feet regularly. On entering a house open-sandalled, dusty feet would be washed by the servant – not a male Jewish servant but a woman, a child or a non-Jew – all those who were deemed unimportant in life. Washing feet was considered far too menial a job for the male owner of the household. Maybe there are some tasks today that a man or woman might think

below them – cleaning toilets, carrying luggage when someone else is paid to do it
- I leave you to come up with your own suggestions....

In John's Gospel, Jesus **stands** up, knowing that he is from God and was **going** to God – in other words knowing how important his life and death are for those around him and for all those who will live afterwards (including us), he takes an apron, ties a towel around himself, pours water and starts washing feet. This is an action of humility – Jesus is portrayed as having no sense of being too proud or important for such an activity – he simply gets on with it. Perhaps he is demonstrating those words from Psalm 25 verse 9, 'He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way'.

The scene unfolds and, not surprisingly, it is Peter who objects – Peter who often gets it wrong, Peter who will betray Jesus and be overwhelmed with guilt at denying he ever knew Jesus. But Peter needs to learn that without accepting Jesus's service, he cannot be a disciple and so do God's will – he needs humility to receive Jesus' teaching about humility – humility to receive those words of Psalm 25 'He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way'. It is a lesson for us all – we have to accept the service of Jesus in complete humility before we can serve. This isn't about false humility – you know the sort of person who tells you they can't play tennis and then when they play, at the first service, they smash the ball past you at what seems 70 mph so you can't even see it! That's false humility – Jesus' action isn't about false humility – neither is it the kind of humility which refuses to be served. The kind of person who always wants to wash up or who always wants to help (which is in itself is to be celebrated) but never ever allows others to serve him/her. Such a person doesn't recognise that others need the opportunity to serve in God's kingdom too. Jesus is leading the humble in what is right and teaching the humble his way. Although Peter often makes mistakes, he is quick to change to the right way and realises instantly, in a flash, that he must allow Jesus to serve him. But he then wants Jesus to wash him from head to toe, not just his feet: we can imagine the disciples watching with mild humour and affection as Peter's voice shows almost excessive enthusiasm of someone keen to follow Jesus - wanting to do everything right . Naturally, we all want such enthusiasm to serve God, to do God's will, but it

can be overwhelming and does come with a health warning. I remember when we were in Salisbury theological college with keen ordinands, all of whom were excited about their future vocation as priests, it became a bit of a 'joke' that if you were unwell or went into hospital, you kept VERY quiet – you didn't let anyone know you were ill because if you did, you would be visited by absolutely everyone in the college – all of them keen to exercise their pastoral skills to which they were called by God. Without sensitivity, 'service' can sometimes be overwhelming. Peter's enthusiasm is gently reprimanded by Jesus – there is no need for the **whole** body to be washed – the feet will be enough and Peter, with his usual insight and humility, accepts Jesus' teaching.

Jesus follows these actions with the explanation that his disciples must copy him – if he, the master washes their feet then they should serve each other in the same way. These actions and words of Jesus were given to the disciples, at that particular moment, but if we too want to be a disciple of Christ, then they must also be for us today.

So what do we learn?

Firstly, we must be prepared to allow Jesus to wash our feet – to allow ourselves to receive from other people, however humbling that feels to us. Many years ago I had a threatened miscarriage with one of my children and was confined to bed for a couple of weeks. Receiving continually from others in terms of food, child care, washing and so on was difficult; it made me feel frustrated, irritated, worried and certainly not at peace in the way I should have felt given that others around me were serving me. It is sometimes difficult to receive the service of others.

Firstly then, we must be prepared to receive from God. Secondly, we must be ready to serve those around us at any opportunity. Many people here DO serve others both in their work and in this place. God IS being served here in the cathedral. Sometimes, though, there is a dilemma for us – might we/can we serve too much? Might it damage us? A man called William Sykes speaks of teaching in a school in Nigeria called 'The Good Samaritan School for children with special needs'. The unique school had been founded by an elderly missionary couple.

The couple accommodated the children in their own home, looked after them, fed them, taught them and nursed them and were on call 24 hours a day. In spite of all the demands on their energy and time, the couple remained cheerful and produced a happy atmosphere as they served God. There was a warm friendly atmosphere in the school but it was a costly service. In the end their health broke down and they had to return to England. Service to Christ is costly: we often hear people say, 'Don't make yourself ill because you are no use to anyone then.' There can be a delicate balance between health and service to God and much prayer and discernment is needed to make sure we offer the right service invoked by God.

Symbolically tonight, some peoples' feet will be washed. A sign that everyone in this community desires both to serve and to receive – not because that way they become noticed or feel important but because to be disciples of Christ, we all need both to serve and receive.

The possibility of doing God's will, serving God is universal. Martin Luther King said, 'Everybody can be great . Because anyone can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don't have to know about Einstein's theory of relativity to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love'.

Our whole selves are stirred up by love when we consider the events following Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet and we witness an innocent man dying on a cross for love of us – love poured out upon the whole of humanity.

In response, we too long to do God's will, to serve: in all our weakness, in all our sinfulness, with all our inadequacy. Still, we long to serve. With such a longing we dare to come together to the altar tonight: we come in humility to accept and receive such love – to receive the body and blood of Christ together.

I'd like to finish with the well known prayer by *Saint Ignatius Loyola about service:*

Teach us, Good Lord,
To Serve you as you deserve;
To give and not to count the cost;
To fight and not to heed the wounds;
To labour and not to ask for any reward,
save that of knowing that we do your will.
Through Jesus Christ Our Lord, Amen.