

Maundy Thursday 2021

Maundy Thursday.

I have to confess that till a few years ago, I didn't have a clue what *Maundy* meant. In the church where I grew up, we never spoke of *Maundy* Thursday, though they did take this day seriously. It was called, though, simply *Holy* Thursday. What's *Maundy* all about?

Well, I imagine quite a few of you know – it traces its way back through some medieval French, *mande*, till eventually you get to the Latin *mandatum*. *Mandatum* – meaning something like commandment. This is *commandment* Thursday.

At which two related thoughts spring to mind.

Number one, are any of us, right now, really in the mood for being commanded? It has been, if we're honest, a pretty rocky twelve months, even for those of us who have not suffered from the coronavirus. We're all feeling a bit battered, a bit tender, and pretty overwhelmed by life. I'm not sure there's ever a great time for commandments, but right now certainly doesn't feel like one.

Number two, what, anyway, are we being commanded? It's Commandment Thursday, but what actually is the command? To which there are several plausible answers. You might say it was the command to wash one another's feet – maybe quite literally, or maybe understood as a metaphor for the wider task of loving one another as Christ loved us. A new commandment, *mandatum*, I give unto you, says Jesus, that you love one another as I have loved you. Or then again, maybe it is the command to *do this* – to take bread and wine and share them in remembrance of him. The Eucharist isn't some clever invention of the Church dreamt up by a committee of the first disciples: no, this is what we've always done because Jesus told us to. Commanded us.

I'm not sure, actually, that we have choose between those options. Was it footwashing, was it love one another, was it celebrate the eucharist? If there's one thing to realise tonight, it's that those things go together.

You see, if all Jesus has to say to you is: love your neighbour and wash their feet, then frankly He is not much use to us. We *know*, at least in our better moments, that we should do these things. We know that life is better in every way – richer, happier, more joyful, more beautiful when we don't fight and compete with each other, when we instead share and serve. That's one reason we were drawn to Jesus in the first place, we can see that his kind of life is what we were meant to be. Loving is what we're *for* – made that way, just as on Sunday I suggested we were *made* to bend the knee.

We know all this. Our problem is that it's hard. We're tired, we're small, we're easily knocked around, we easily get hurt and frightened and resentful and protective – the number of things that stop us from loving, that shut us into ourselves, is really quite spectacular. And simply *commanding* people to resist all that and love anyway, whilst perhaps admirable, is also a bit futile. You cannot command yourself to love. Not for long. And not even once you've told yourself quite correctly that love isn't about warm romantic feelings, that it is, instead, about washing feet, about practical service, about someone else first. You cannot command yourself to do it. We might have been made for it, but the mystery of sin that something's got broken inside us, and we no longer work that way. Real, deep, wide, consistent, simple love ... we can yearn for it, but we know it's not us.

Which is why Jesus did not just command it. Or, why he didn't command it alone. He gave us this other command – do this, in remembrance of me. Celebrate the eucharist. And the connection between the two is this. If you try to love out of your own resource, out of your own depth, you will not get very far. The world has made us poor and shallow. We do not have enough to give. But, if you will come to this table, if you, in faith and hope, share the bread and wine, something very mysterious will happen. You will find that is no longer a question of *your* resource, your *depth*. Here you are connected to something deeper and vaster than you can possibly imagine, to a bottomless wellspring of love and grace and mercy – in short, to the life of Jesus. At the risk of anticipating Easter – but in fact, *every* Eucharist, whenever you do it, anticipates Easter, this is the entire point: Jesus is still alive. That glory the first disciples beheld – the real, deep, wide, consistent, simple, love – he's still *there*, and what's more, he *wants* to lay hold of you, and rise up through you, and work in you.

And the way he chooses to do it is by taking bread and wine, and saying – just as these things feed your body, I will feed your spirit. Just as you live on them, you'll live on me. Just as they become your strength and power, so will I. Eat me. Drink me. Let me become the substance of your life. This is my body, given for you. This is my blood shed for you.

The command to love, and the command to *do this*, are wholly wrapped up in each other. We do this, so that we might love. So that we might be able to love. He only commands what He first promises. Let us lay hold once more of the promise, and turn again to the task.

Amen.