



1 April 2021
Maundy Thursday
Sermon – St James's Piccadilly
The Revd Dr John Russell

*May I speak in the name of God – Creator,
Christ and Holy Spirit.*

As many of you will know already, Mark's gospel is written roughly about 40 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Matthew's gospel was composed about 15 years after Mark, and Luke's gospel in turn about another 15 years after Matthew. Matthew and Luke are heavily reliant on Mark's gospel, and we tend to group these 3 earlier gospels together. But the Gospel of John, from where this evening's reading is taken, composed maybe another 20 years after Luke, is a very different creature.

So, some people like Mark's gospel because its earlier - and shorter! And some people think that because its earlier, and closer in time to the historical Jesus, that must mean it's more reliable. For example, there are no nativity stories in Mark. The Gospel of Mark begins with Jesus aged 30 being baptised and starting his public ministry. 'None of that Angel Gabriel, shepherds and 3 Kings baloney that Matthew and Luke added into the Jesus story later on', some people say. And the Gospel of John – well that's even further away from the historical

events, and therefore bound to be the most unreliable of all the four gospels.

But looking through the eyes of faith, you might view this entirely the other way around. Yes, the earlier gospels might give us something closer to the bare historical facts of Jesus's life, death and resurrection but Matthew, Mark and Luke haven't really got the faintest idea of what is truly going on in the Jesus story. And it's not until we get to the Gospel of John that we actually get something approaching a coherent explanation for the incredible events that happened nearly 100 years previously.

In the famous prologue to the Gospel of John, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God', John is reaching towards the doctrine of the Trinity. That Jesus is not merely 'the Son of God', in the way that, for example, Perseus and Dionysus were the sons of Zeus in the religion of the ancient Greeks, but that Jesus is, in fact, the Second Person of the Eternal Trinity, the Word of God, the logos, who was in the beginning with God, and through him all things were made: the doctrine of the pre-

existence of Christ prior to the incarnation in the historical Jesus. A seismic shift in Christian theology. And in many ways, John's gospel is a working through of the Jesus story in light of this fresh recognition of who Jesus really is.

So there are some significant events in the Jesus story that John presents rather differently to the other gospels including that the Gospel of John has no direct account of the institution of the Eucharist by Jesus at the Last Supper. There is no scene in John's gospel where Jesus takes bread and wine, identifies them as his body and his blood, distributes them to the disciples, and instructs them to repeat that ritual in his remembrance. Instead, when John presents his version of the Last Supper, rather than anything to do with sharing bread and wine, he emphasises the washing of the disciples' feet as the big symbolic act which both prepares us for how we are meant to understand the impending crucifixion of Jesus when it happens, and also spells out the implications of what our own personal being 'in communion' with Jesus is intended to achieve.

Jesus is at the table with his disciples – reclining on cushions, propped up on their elbows as you did. Dipping pitta bread into bowls of hummus, and eating olives, licking

their fingers. The buzz of conversation amongst friends under the flickering oil lamps. And while all of this is going on, Jesus gets up from the table, strips off his outer robe, wraps a towel around his waist, pours water into a basin and begins to wash the disciples' feet. And everyone falls silent as their Rabbi, their teacher, their Master, their Lord, begins to perform this most menial work of a household servant. When Jesus reaches Peter, Peter objects to this humiliating impropriety but Jesus replies 'Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.' And then, as Jesus puts his robe back on to join them at the table, he explains to the disciples: 'I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.'

As he has tried many times before, Jesus is trying to turn the disciples' conventional ideas of power and success upside down. To show them that God's glory will be manifested in self-effacing servanthood. Servant leadership is one of those utterly central and yet enigmatic concepts in Christian theology – you could argue that it's the central concept of Christianity, and the gospels offer us a whole series of images of servant leadership in order to try and prepare us to understand what's happening on the Cross. From the Annunciation of the Angel Gabriel to Mary, an ordinary Jewish woman living in a fleapit

peasant town so insignificant that Nathanael will later scoff “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”. To the incarnation of the Almighty and Eternal Lord of all Creation in the form of a fragile baby lying in a feeding trough for cattle in a stable smelling of animal dung. To the temptation in the wilderness, when Jesus – freshly emerging from a baptism in which he was proclaimed the beloved Son of God – then systemically rejects Satan’s proposals that he should accomplish God’s purposes by an impressive show of divine power. To the image of the long-awaited Messiah making his grand entrance into Jerusalem riding on a grey donkey, leading a ragtag procession of people across a carpet of green palm leaves laid upon the road. To the scene this evening of the Master who kneels and washes the feet of his disciples.

Jesus’s teaching on power and vulnerability – in what he says and how he acts - is not an easy thing to understand. And it’s not always easy to apply to our own lives, or in our life together as church. The Way of the Cross is often misconstrued as a complete resignation of power and boundaries and self-care; an embrace of suffering for its own sake as intrinsically holy; a submissive capitulation to the demands of other people.

But the Christian life is not about the renunciation of power – it’s about embracing the powerful gifts that God has bestowed upon all of us, and using them responsibly, accountably and transparently in the service of the kingdom rather than in the service of ourselves. The conventional wisdom of the world is to seek power and despise vulnerability. Be a winner not a loser, as Donald Trump might say. In a liberal Christian context, that sometimes gets flipped so that there’s a deep suspicion of power, and of its potential for misuse and oppression, and a very keen identification with vulnerability. But a failure to acknowledge one’s power can be as bad as overplaying it. And while we need to accept our vulnerability, we also need to contain it so that it doesn’t overwhelm and immobilise us. And it can be very easy for us to weaponize our personal traumas, and turn our triggers into a cosh to hit other people over the head with. When we perceive ourselves to be a victim, we can quickly turn that into a justification for becoming a persecutor. In the context of social activism, there’s a lot of talk in activist communities at the moment about how to make the pursuit of social justice a more joyful experience; how to nurture oneself as an activist; how to use our sense of political outrage fruitfully and creatively, rather than just getting perpetually

triggered into our stress body and then suffering activist burnout.

So perhaps we might like to reflect this evening about our relationship to our power and to our vulnerability. Both individually and collectively, where are we in positions of power, authority, leadership and privilege? And to what extent do we exercise that power in the best interests of others - to encourage them, to bring out their gifts and help them flourish? To be a good ally who is ready to act with and for others to fight oppression and injustice. And to what extent do we use our power and privilege for our own benefit and self-advancement, to impose our opinions upon other people, pursue our own agenda and enhance our own prestige? And what are our fragilities and insecurities? What are the deep fears and shames that lie behind them? And to what extent are we able to notice them, to recognise and accept them as part of ourselves and our story, and to regulate them and to practise good self-care. To what extent do they propel us to try and escape from them by seeking to control our environment and other people? Or immobilise us and stop us from speaking out and taking action when we should?

The Way of the Cross is something about being able – empowered by divine grace - to walk the path that God desires us to

walk, which often entails some sacrifice according to the conventional wisdom of the world, a sacrifice from our substance not merely from our excess, and so which necessitates an element of suffering, some sharing in the Cross – but the decision to go to the Cross is also the decision to be with God forever, and ultimately life-giving and full of resurrection joy.

This symbolic presentation of Jesus' servant leadership on Maundy Thursday is one of the most sacred moments of the church year. It is sacred because this evening we gather at the Lord's table to commence the Easter Tri-du-um – the three holy days of Christ's passion, in which we proclaim again Christ's journey of radical love that led him unto death, even death on a cross – and how this life of humble obedience to God was vindicated in his exaltation. It is sacred because this evening we remember that we must let Jesus wash our weary feet with tender love, before we may in turn minister likewise to other people in his name. It is sacred, for tomorrow, the incarnate Word, who was with God in the beginning and through whom all things were made, stoops to love to the bittersweet end all creatures across space and time, and the whole of creation will reverberate with the power of the Cross and all who believe shall enter with Christ into the secret life of God.
Amen.