

Thursday, 14 April 2022
Maundy Thursday
The Rev'd Dr Mariama Ifode-Blease
'These hands are for greater things'

May I speak in the name of the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

Did they cry or was it a silent Upper Room, when Jesus began to wash their feet? Did some of the apostles rush to try to stop him? Surely it wasn't only Peter who spoke to disagree with what he was witnessing?

In this most intimate of scenes, Jesus is confronted by unpedicured, calloused, stinky, dirty and hard-worn feet, which symbolised the work and walk of his friends' lives. With all that had happened before this moment: Jesus's anointing at Bethany, the joyful entry into Jerusalem, the prediction of his death, and all that will happen after this moment: Jesus stating he is the True Vine, Gethsemane, Jesus' arrest and betrayal, here between the washing of feet and the meal that seals a new covenant, *here* is where we are asked to be utterly ourselves and to see more of our human purpose.

What are we here for, if it is not to recognise that bread is broken and wine is shared with the same hands that washed the feet. The hands that we have, in whatever form we have them, are made for things such as these. They are for greater things.

Throughout that evening in which the weight of knowing what was to come must have been right there with Jesus, he focuses us on the fact that the gift of life is to continue whether he is physically present or not. We read in the Gospel of John, chapter 13:

And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself.

Something mysterious is happening here, as the Gospel writer points to what has been given to Jesus by God and what must follow as a result. There is a new way of seeing the world and seeing people; there is a new ask. Take your hands, look at them and know you have already been given the mandate to care. We have been given a mandate to care, because our hands, these hands, are for greater things. Jesus got up from the table, he moved to where each disciple was seated or reclining and he met them there. How many times in our lives have we had the feeling of God coming to meet us where we are?

Simon Peter's incredulity must have been loud, we read in John 13. I often imagine him as loud, but he probably wasn't: "You will never wash my feet'," he said firmly. And we say something similar, don't we? *You will never wash my feet Jesus; you will never come close to all that has been roughened by life; you will never see all my soul blisters and the pain and effect of long and hard travels.*

Jesus answered, “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me” meaning: unless you let me this close, you will not see what I see in you and what you have to see in me. We will not have had the closeness of touch, and my hands will not be able to hold yours.

We are here in a place in which Jesus, through his actions, shows us what our hands must do. Because, our hands, these hands were made for greater things. We know that the washing of feet takes place at the same table at which Jesus breaks bread and shares his cup of wine. We read in 1 Corinthians 11.23-26:

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me”.

Jesus takes a meal from his roots and heritage and gives it new meaning for this new movement growing around him. The tangibility of this act reminds us that we are body and blood, and brings to mind all that we missed during the pandemic in not being able to worship together for so long. Passing the bread and the cup of wine becomes *an act of defiant living that is in our heart-memory and spiritual memory*. God, through the person of Jesus is not asking for much more than to share the bread and wine of a new kind at a table that has already been set before us, at which our feet will be washed and our tired legs find rest.

In the preceding chapter, John 12, Jesus was anointed in Bethany, a woman called Mary took perfume in her hands and poured it on Jesus’s feet. Her hands were also made for greater things. This is a unique form of anointing from someone who had no societal right to do what she did, but who had legitimacy and admiration in the presence of the divine.

At this table, at which we are given a new mandate, a new commandment, we are asked to love as we are loved. That only works, however, if we actually feel loved. So let us start there. Let us start by looking at our hands and seeing the permission to love and be loved through them, permission to hold hope, to speak out love through our hands. We wash the feet of others not because we are feigning humility, but because this moment of tangibility reminds us of how we are to treat the vulnerable and those at risk of harm.

In a society in which our attention span and brain time are monetised, the washing of feet takes us back to first principles. You do not need to do anything to make God love you. It is freely given, and that love was there first. In the heat and dust of Jerusalem choosing to wash the feet meant you came face to face with all the literal dirt of life, and Jesus does not run away from that. Jesus isn’t running. Jesus is showing us something of God’s love.

For the 60th anniversary of the NHS, poet and writer Michael Rosen wrote the following poem ‘These at the hands’:

These are the hands
That touch us first

Feel your head
Find the pulse
And make your bed.
These are the hands
That tap your back
Test the skin
Hold your arm
Wheel the bin
Change the bulb
Fix the drip
Pour the jug
Replace your hip.
These are the hands
That fill the bath
Mop the floor
Flick the switch
Soothe the sore
Burn the swabs
Give us a jab
Throw out sharps
Design the lab.
And these are the hands
That stop the leaks
Empty the pan
Wipe the pipes
Carry the can
Clamp the veins
Make the cast
Log the dose
And touch us last.¹

Tonight, on the eve of Jesus' crucifixion and death we are confronted with the potential of who we are and the choices that lay before us. These hands are for greater things. Not for torture, or committing war crimes, not for exploitation and abuse, not for ridicule, not for stripping a 16-year-old girl in her school, not for removing the dignity of others. To tenderly hold, *yes*, to wash away shame in a loving embrace, *yes*, to wipe away tears, *yes*, to restore, *yes*, to affirm and celebrate the identities of others, *absolutely yes*.

The hands that washed the feet of his friends are the same hands that are nailed to the cross. These hands, made in the image of God, our hands, are made for greater things. May that revelation of purpose hold us as we journey to the cross, this and every year.

Amen.

¹ <https://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poem/these-are-hands/>