

Sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist | Maundy Thursday | 2 April 2026

Readings: Exodus 12.1-4, 11-14 | Corinthians 11.23-26 | John 13.1-17, 31b-35

I am probably not the only person here who really dislikes vague and imprecise instructions. It is deeply frustrating for both the person making the instruction, because they don't get what they want, and for the person acting on those instructions. They are either frustrated by being unsure about what is required or distressed that what they do is not what was wanted. And let us not even get onto instructions which change mid-task, they wreak havoc for all concerned.

So, when Jesus urges us, "Do this in remembrance of me" what is he asking us to do. Thankfully, in both word and action Jesus is crystal clear about what he is expecting of us. As we enter into the mystery of Maundy Thursday, we find three distinct and significant things that Jesus did. First, he has a meal with his friends in which he takes bread and wine, tells them "This is my body" and "This is my blood" and encourages his followers to do this in memory of him. Second, he dons a towel and washes his disciples' feet and tells them that he is setting an example to them. Third, he goes off into the night to pray in a garden from where he is arrested.

These three actions are at the core of what it means to follow Jesus and to do what he asks of us, and in these we meet Jesus. So let us look more closely at each of them and how we can walk with him.

Our reading from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians reminds us that Jesus "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.'" In an essay published last year our former Archbishop Rowan Williams makes the point that the emergence of the church is rooted in a group of people that gather to share in meal with bread and wine at its heart. It did not emerge from a planning committee, or from a group of like-minded people, or from pursuit of a cause. Rather, "In the food and drink, the bread and wine, that we bless in the power of the Spirit of Jesus, the very life of Jesus, what lives in the flesh and blood of Jesus, become ours. In this bread, in this wine, the living Word is as present and as active as in Jesus of

Nazareth on the streets of Galilee or on the cross." He goes on to remind us that "Paul insists that when we meet in this vision and in this Spirit, when we meet as the pilot project of new humanity, what we do that is new and distinctive to us as a group is to 'feed' on Jesus." It is out of this that the church, the New Testament, the Creeds and so on come into being. This gathering to share bread and wine is at the centre of what we do as church; the Eucharist is at the heart of how we follow Jesus. It is not an optional extra. It is how we meet Jesus, how he feeds us, works

on us, and forms us into a new community. And as Dr Williams puts it, “One of the most important things we can ever say about the Eucharist in the language and practice of the Church is that, whoever else turn up, God does.”

It is through celebrating the Eucharist that the community entrusted with expressing and nurturing the life of the kingdom of God is formed. The Eucharist is a wondrous gift but is not just for us. Its benefits should extend through us into the wider church and into the world as both a glimpse and foretaste of heaven, of God’s new creation. We make this a reality when we follow Jesus’ command to “Do this in remembrance of me” by taking, blessing, breaking and giving bread and wine and meeting him afresh.

As we heard in our gospel this evening, Jesus does a remarkable thing during his last meal with his friends. During the supper he “got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.” By his action and through his words Jesus makes it clear that he is setting an example about how his followers should live. This is something else that they are to do in remembrance of him. In many churches this is re-enacted in the liturgy of this night. But the key thing is in making it a reality in a world in which so many people suffer. Love of neighbour is not just a pious wish but something that is expressed through service to those around us, whether nearby or far away. In doing this we also meet Jesus. In 1923 Bishop Frank Weston gave the Concluding Address at the Anglo Catholic Congress at a time when Anglo Catholics were fighting for the right to reserve the Blessed Sacrament. Bishop Weston stressed the importance of Tabernacles but then continued; “if you are prepared to fight for the right of adoring Jesus in his Blessed Sacrament, then you have got to come out from before your Tabernacle and walk, with Christ mystically present in you, out into the streets of this country, and find the same Jesus in the people of your cities and your

villages. You cannot claim to worship Jesus in the Tabernacle, if you do not pity Jesus in the slum... And it is folly, it is madness, to suppose that you can worship Jesus in the Sacraments and Jesus on the Throne of glory, when you are sweating him in the souls and bodies of his children. It cannot be done.”

Girding ourselves with a towel and washing the feet of others requires personal acts of charity, responding to the needs of those we encounter at home, at work and in our neighbourhood. But this is not enough, especially in the modern world, love of neighbour requires wider action in communities, the nation and the world. As Martin Luther King Jr. expressed it, “Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anaemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.” The freeing of Hebrew slaves in Egypt was not achieved by rescuing individuals but by leading a mass Exodus across the Red Sea. This type of love requires thought, planning and action and is typified by Catholic social action, the practical application of the command to wash our neighbour’s feet. With its focus on upholding human dignity and promoting the common good, the pursuit of justice and fairness in society is an expression of Christian love. Ironically, washing our neighbour’s feet means getting our hands dirty, but in doing this we meet Christ as do this in remembrance of him.

The third distinct action of Jesus on this night is his time of prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. After their meal, and after Judas has slipped out into the night, Jesus and his disciples go across the Kidron valley to the foot of the Mount of Olives. They settle down in a garden. Jesus’ arrival in

Jerusalem is the climax of his mission and will lead to a clash with the authorities which will result in his brutal death. His prayer is not casual or cosy or a recitation of requests to God. Jesus endures a time of intense prayer. There is no feel-good factor to it, even if some of the disciples dose off. The account of it suggests that it follows the pattern of the Our Father, the Lord's Prayer. Again, Jesus words and actions coalesce. His prayer is addressed to the Father, it asks that God's will be done, and Jesus prays that he is not tempted away from what is asked of him. Its intensity is such that sweat drops from him. And we too can do this in remembrance of him. By waiting on God in silence we can meet Jesus and open ourselves to his transforming love. It is through such prayer that we align our will with God's and seek to fulfil his loving purposes. But like Jesus, we may find this to be a time of challenge and anguish. It is not the prayer that is about feeling good or cosy. This is not mindfulness or an act of well-being. It is a prayer that draws us into the pain of the world and into service to the world.

On Maundy Thursday we see Jesus establish the meal that will form his new community, what we call church, we see him set the example about how we should serve one another, and we see him pray to Our Father asking that God's will be done. Jesus urges us to "Do this in remembrance of me" but crucially we do this in the light of his death and in the power of his resurrection. We have no excuse to betray him or deny him or quietly disappear into the background. As we move into these sacred three days let us break bread together, wait on God in prayer and respond in love to our neighbour. In all of these ways we continue to meet Jesus, who gave himself for us and whose love transforms even death itself. Amen.

The Revd Canon Michael Futers, Acting Precentor