

Maundy Thursday 2014

‘I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.’ John 13.34

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

In the current series of the part-scripted reality TV programme, *Made in Chelsea*, one of SW3’s young and glamorous, Jamie Laing, can’t stop falling in love with nearly every woman he meets. Each time he meets a beautiful girl – of which there seem to be an endless supply on the King’s Road – he falls hook, line and sinker. And, in a very short space of time, just hours in one case, he utters those three words, ‘I love you.’

Of course, Jamie is not actually in love with these women, and has some growing up to do, it would seem, when it comes to matters of the heart. He hasn’t yet learned to love. But then, in the light of this evening’s gospel, which of us has? If there was ever a word so precious, yet so often overused and misused, it must be the word ‘love’.

In sharp contrast to what Jamie means by ‘love’, or what is meant by countless pop stars, celebrities, and regular men and women, the love of which *Jesus* speaks today – the love represented by the Greek word *agape* – is very different. For Jesus does not just bandy the word around, he physically demonstrates what it is.

Jesus gives a new commandment, in Latin a *mandatum*, from which we get the English words ‘commandment’, ‘mandatory’ and indeed ‘Maundy’. The *mandatum* is that we should love one another, and he expresses this love in the washing of feet, a ceremony we will repeat in a few moments. There is nothing glamorous or romantic about what he does; in fact, completely the opposite. In taking off his outer robe, girding himself with a towel, and washing his disciples’ feet, Jesus turns the relationship he has with the disciples on its head; he takes the place of a slave.

And so it should be with the love which we share. Love is not something which is bestowed by a higher person onto a lesser one. Rather, love means *taking off our outer robe*: removing anything which makes us think more highly of ourselves, or which gives us power, position or authority. Love means *girding ourselves with a towel*: putting on the vesture of humility and service. Love means *taking the place of a slave*: for if we think that by loving someone we are better than they, or more powerful, or more worthy of honour, then that is not love. It is pity at best, or condescension.

Jesus doesn’t just show us *how* to love, he also shows us *who* to love. He washes not the hands nor the faces of the disciples, parts of the body which are visible, and perhaps more becoming, but their feet: feet with their hardened skin, spindly toes, blisters, verrucas, ingrown toenails... literally warts and all. For it is easy to love that which is beautiful, we only have to watch *Made in Chelsea* to see that.

By washing his disciples' feet, Jesus calls us to love that which is unattractive, ugly, unlovely, unlovable: 'Love to the loveless shown,' we sung on Sunday, 'that they might lovely be.' He calls us to love the people we find unappealing: the drunk homeless man; the person who gets on our nerves; the cocaine addict who funds her habit by selling her body; the person we try to cross the road to avoid. We aren't just to love the people we like, or the people with whom we share things in common. And, as Jesus washes the feet of Judas Iscariot, he calls us even to love the people who clearly don't love us. God's love is unconditional and unmerited, and so our love should be.

But there's something else which the *mandatum* calls us to do which we may find even more challenging than loving one another, even more challenging than removing our outer robes, girding ourselves with a towel, and washing one another's feet.

Simon Peter, when it comes to his turn to have his feet washed, initially refuses: 'Lord, are you going to wash *my* feet?' For some, for many perhaps, it is as or more difficult *to be loved* than it is to love. Most people don't want to have their feet washed on Maundy Thursday. It's embarrassing to expose to another person a part of the body we prefer to keep covered up. It's awkward to allow another person to touch a part of our body which we worry might be unsightly, perhaps even smelly.

As people who are commanded *to love* we must be willing to *be loved*. And to be loved means losing our inhibitions, and allowing ourselves to be *ourselves*, rather than the images we prefer to project. For Jesus loves us as we are, and as we recall his *mandatum*, we are to allow *others* to love us as we are, rather than as we wish to be seen by them.

I'm in no place to psychoanalyse *Made in Chelsea's* Jamie, but I wonder if the reason he finds it hard to love is because he finds it even harder *to be loved*. Maybe – hopefully – he is in a church this evening, and perhaps he will come forward to have his feet washed, to be loved, and so loved, able to love others.

In a few moments, here in *this* church, *you* have the opportunity to have your feet washed – you don't need to have signed up, just come and sit on the front row when the time comes, or on the end of your pew if there is not room at the front. But don't worry, it's not compulsory! But what is compulsory (indeed, mandatory), even if we don't symbolise it in the washing of feet, is that we follow the commandment of Jesus: 'Love one another.' As we wash and are washed, and as we love and are loved, may we know the unconditional, unsurpassable love of Jesus Christ, who this night willingly enters into his passion for the love he has for his children. As we share in that passion, and are transformed by that love, may we go out to love one another.

'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.'
