

This talk was inspired by one of our confirmation group who've been meeting on a Sunday morning. We were talking about how our faith, and how our understanding of the faith, what it would be like if Jesus, like so many other religious leaders, had written a book.

The view had been expressed that it might clear up some of the problems of interpretation, and the confusion around some of Christianity's teaching. But then, someone chimed in and said that actually it was good that Jesus didn't write a book, because he left us with something more compelling, actions.

Jesus left us actions which don't need to be translated, are equally compelling to people in different cultures and times, and tonight, on this Maundy Thursday, we consider one of Jesus's most important actions, his washing of the disciples' feet. Maundy is related to the Latin word, "mandatum," from which we get the word mandate or command. Jesus mandated his disciples to love one another. But he didn't write a thesis on how to love one another. He instead demonstrated his mandate with an action. "I give you an example," Jesus said. He showed them what he meant by his actions.

Foot washing was common in Jesus' time. In fact, there were customs around foot washing that were established hundreds of years before Jesus lived. And actually, we see them in the very ancient text of the Bible. In Genesis 12, three mysterious visitors come to Abraham. He greeted them, and got his servants to bring some water, we're told, so that they could wash their feet. In Luke Chapter 7, Jesus is invited to a Pharisees house, but things didn't work out as planned, and Jesus ends up being critical of the hospitality that he's been offered. And he said to his host, "When I entered your house, you gave me no water for my feet."

Note that in both these biblical incidents, there's no servant washing anybody's feet. It was something people often did for themselves. In fact, in Jesus's time, there was a view that washing somebody else's feet was even beneath a servant. So, what does Jesus' action here teach us? What's he showing? What's he giving us an example of? Let me suggest two things.

Firstly, the importance of humility. Jesus had much to say on the subject of humility. He says in Luke 4, "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted." And St Paul writes beautifully about the example of Jesus's life, what that says to us about humility. He wrote this. "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he

was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave. Being born in human likeness, and being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." And that humility of which Paul spoke is very evident in this story from Maundy Thursday.

We have this image of Jesus crawling around on his hands and knees amongst the smelly feet of the disciples. And remember that the disciples have just been arguing amongst themselves about who is the greatest of them, who should have the best seat in the kingdom of God? And Jesus comes amongst them, washing their feet. Jesus shows them another more humble way. As St Paul said, "He emptied himself."

And I think that Jesus' actions also show us the importance of serving. And again, we see Jesus' action illustrating an important aspect of his teaching. He says this in the Gospel of Matthew. "It will not be so among you, but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave, just as the son of man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." And by washing the disciples' feet on this night, Jesus is showing what it is to serve, what it is to be a servant of one another. And this act made Peter uncomfortable. "You're not going to wash my feet," he said. But Jesus insists. So, Peter then swings the pendulum to the other extreme. "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head." And there's more of a hint of religiosity in Peter's reaction. Not content to merely receive what Jesus offered, Peter one-up's him, asking for a greater cleansing, demonstrating, as St Peter often does, the desire to stand out from the crowd, to be exceedingly good at his religion, another example of St Peter missing the point of what Jesus was saying and doing. Foot washing is not a ritual. It's not a religious act. There are no liturgical rules for foot washing. There's nothing prescribed. It's a way of life. It's a mindset.

Jesus is calling us to maintain a foot washing mindset. Jesus left us actions to follow, because our faith is not about following rituals, doing the right thing. It's not following rules laid out in a book. It's about living in a certain way. Our faith is worked out in the midst of life as we serve one another. Jesus left us actions to follow, not rules to apply. So, let us recommit ourselves this evening to walk the way of Jesus, the way of the cross, the humble way of service. Amen.