

Sermon for Maundy Thursday (Bristol Cathedral)

Texts: Exodus 12:1-14 and John 13:1-17 & 31b-35

Human beings have been making love for 195'000 years.

At least, that is how long my colleagues in the Anthropology Department say we have existed as a species. And unlike the New Zealand Mud Snail, we can't really exist as a species without making love.

Human beings certainly talk about love a great deal. After all, virtually every poet from Shakespeare to Shakira has said something on the subject.

So, all things considered, we could be forgiven for thinking we know a thing or two about it.

But in tonight's gospel, Jesus shows us that, however much we may talk about love, human beings really don't understand it at all.

When he commands us to love one another, he tells us that this is a new commandment. He is implying, in other words, that this is not something we have been doing up to now. "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

Now, many scholars have puzzled over why Jesus should call this commandment new. After all, the command to love is already present in the Book of Leviticus. "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against

any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself.” And given that Jesus knew his Old Testament, he must have known what Leviticus said.

And, in fact, when he was asked which of the commandments was the greatest, Jesus cited that very verse of Leviticus. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

Even so, on the night before he died, Jesus described his injunction to love as a new commandment, the *mandatum novum* from which this feast takes its name. So what did he mean? What exactly is new here?

The answer, I think, is that Jesus is proposing a paradigm shift in our conception of love. Because, whereas in Leviticus, you were told to love your neighbour “as yourself,” in the tonight’s gospel you are told to love your neighbour “as I have loved you.”

In other words the archetype of love has changed. Before the Last Supper, we were invited to measure our love for others by the standard of our self-love. Now, we are being invited to measure our love for others by the standard which Jesus sets.

Our love for our neighbour is, therefore, no longer to be compared with our natural love of ourselves. It is to be compared with what Jesus has done for

us. Jesus has become the model, the paradigm, the exemplar of love. And that is new.

To put it another way, Maundy Thursday is the day when love is redefined.

That redefinition takes dramatic form in the foot-washing recorded in our gospel reading.

When Jesus kneels before his disciples and washes their feet, he is performing a prophetic action, an action which proclaims and illustrates what God is doing.

Ezekiel lay on his side for 390 days to symbolize God's punishment of Judah. Hosea married an adulterous woman to symbolize God's constancy to a faithless Israel.

And tonight, Jesus washes his disciples' feet, because, in him, God has become a human being in order to cleanse us from our sins. The foot-washing therefore symbolizes all that the Son of God does for fallen humanity, starting with the incarnation and ending with the passion.

And it's important to grasp that, for God, becoming a human being is quite as demeaning as washing the dirt off Peter's feet. For in the Incarnation, the infinite, impassible and all-glorious Son takes on the limits, the pain, the humiliation of the human condition and makes them his own.

As Paul puts it in the letter to the Philippians, “though he was in the form of God, [he] did not regard equality with God as a thing 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.”

The main point of the foot-washing is not, therefore, to encourage us to perform acts of service for one another; though there’s nothing wrong with that.

Rather, the foot-washing sets an entirely new paradigm of love, a paradigm which is not human, but divine.

The second person of the Trinity took human nature upon himself and died for our sins. And that is what love really means. That is what true love involves.

Our human understanding of love is altogether too narrow, too self-regarding. So if we really want to know about love, we must contemplate what it involves for God. It’s a point St John makes eloquently in his epistle. “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.”

You see, when we say that God is love, we do not mean that there is something in God which is a bit like human love, as though human love were the model, and God’s love the copy. We mean precisely the opposite. We mean that human love is a partial likeness of the perfect love which

exists in God. We mean that God's love is the only love truly worthy of the name.

To put it another way, God's love is not an echo of ours; our love is an echo of God's. The noblest, most selfless, most inspiring example of human love is to the love of God, as the twinkling reflection of a star in a muddy puddle is to the distant sun that made it.

For God is love, and we love only to the extent that we love like He does.

In Jesus, that eternal kind of love takes a human form. In Jesus, God's love is expressed, for Jesus is God's Word. And, in Jesus, that love can be seen, it can be touched, for Jesus is the Word made flesh. So when we are commanded to love our neighbour as Jesus has loved us, we are being invited to mimic the love of God; to love, in other words, as God loves.

So what is it we learn from Jesus about the nature of divine love?

The first thing we learn is that true love supersedes even our instinctive desire for self-preservation. As Jesus says later on in St John's gospel "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." Real love, divine love, has no limits. There is nothing that it will not undertake for the beloved, nothing it will not suffer.

Such love has no place for nice calculations about what is reasonable, or appropriate, or fair. It is rather the constant effort to do good to the object of

one's love. For the love which Jesus enjoins is a love that delights in service, not a love that demands reciprocation.

The second thing we learn about love from Jesus is that real love is never blown off course by the emotions. In fact, I would go so far as to say that human feelings are quite irrelevant to it.

After all, there were many occasions when Jesus did not feel very warm about human beings at all. Mark's gospel, in particular, records moments when Jesus was angry, or grieved, or indignant at the behaviour of those around him. And yet he continued to act for their good, even at the cost of his life.

The love of Jesus, the love which we are called to emulate, was not therefore a matter of the feelings but of the will. It was a love driven not by his emotion but by his determination. To love as Jesus loves, in other words, you do not have to feel warmly disposed to your neighbour. But you must be prepared to die for her. Or, as is more likely, you must be willing to spend your life performing acts of service for your neighbour, even though she does not deserve it and even though she never offers you a word of thanks.

It is when you manage that, that you reflect in your own life the unwavering, transcendent love of God.

If that seems unreasonable, it is. But before we grumble, we would do well to remember that, tonight, Jesus washes the feet of Judas Iscariot, with quite as much gentleness as he washes the feet of Peter.

