

Sunday 15 May 2022 Easter 5

Gospel John 13:31-35 [Joy]

THE COMMANDMENT TO LOVE

Food

Our gospel reading comes at the end of another meal Jesus has been sharing with his friends. Food features highly in the gospel narratives, and today many people seem to share what they are eating not just in reality but via social media.

I remember, when I was first married, that Pete and I were often invited out to share an evening meal with friends, but then came the trauma for me, when we had to reciprocate. I had not spent any time in the Kitchen while I was growing up, and therefore it was a steep learning curve to produce a three-course meal that could be acceptable to guests. A very early example of my lack of experience was when I followed a recipe for a custard flan. It sounded simple, but, having put it in the fridge to set as was suggested, it was still very runny an hour later. I thought perhaps there had been a misprint, so I transferred it to the oven, but it was now even more runny, so back to the fridge and it *still* refused to set!

The meal that occurs immediately before our reading this morning is very important, because it was, according to our author, the last meal Jesus shared with the disciples. We are not told what the meal consisted of, only that they dipped bread into a common pot – perhaps a stew is a possibility.

The main narrative centres not around the food, but what Jesus DID at that meal. It is very different from the last meals described in the other three gospels. Jesus becomes their servant, strips off his outer garments, ie symbolically his status, and washes the dirty, smelly, dusty feet of the disciples. It is an enacted parable; it foreshadows what is soon to happen to him. He will be stripped of his status and hung on a cross for us, and ridiculed by the title hung above his head: *THE KING OF THE JEWS*.

But he wasn't a King. He was much more than that, and he certainly wasn't just a King of the *Jews*. Kings do have laws and rules that their subjects are expected to obey.

This morning, our reading gives us the commandment that Jesus expects us to obey. In one sense it is not, for the Jews, a new rule. For them, the two most important rules are contained in the Shema, which the men wear during the

synagogue service, and which they also attach to their front door posts. The Shema says basically: *Love the lord your God and Love your neighbour as yourself*. However, this very important teaching had become overshadowed by the everyday rules they had to obey, mainly about food. These referred to what things were Kosher and could be eaten, how they were to be prepared – ie separate milk and meat kitchens – and who they could share the meal with. We saw in our reading from Acts this morning how Peter had to wrestle with these issues as a practicing Jew, and now a Christian, joined by people from many other racial backgrounds.

The interesting thing about Jesus reminding them of these two rules at the last meal he ate with them, is that he gave them a clear idea of what the term LOVE meant to him: love for them and for God is shown in his becoming their servant, and, in the same way, they are expected to become the servant of others. The commandment finishes with a new sentence added to the Shema: *by this shall all men [and women] know you are my disciples, if you have love one for another*.

They are to become his witnesses, so that his message will continue to spread after his imminent death. The greatest witness they, and we, can offer to the world of the existence of Jesus is actually the way WE live our lives today. Are we ready to follow his example: *giving up our own comfort and status to really love and serve others?*

After Jesus has said these words, John says that, having already sent Judas out to do what he felt he had to do, the NIGHT had come. For the author of the fourth Gospel darkness meant that bad things were about to take place – ie Jesus's arrest, trial and Crucifixion. But also he introduces a new key word into the narrative: GLORY – because from this darkness *light will be born*. For John, the Crucifixion was a glorious thing. This is what Christ came into the world to achieve. The cross was his coronation. He had said a little earlier: *and if I be lifted up I will draw all men [and women] unto myself*. His hour had come.

It was the final test for him and for his followers, and I want now to turn to the painting of the Crucifixion by Salvador Dali. I am sure many of you are familiar with it (see end of this file). It hangs in the Kelvingrove museum in Glasgow. I have been familiar with it for many years, but it took a recent TV programme to point out something unique to me. If we look at Christ's hands and feet, something is MISSING – the nails. This is the ultimate example of what his love for us is. It was only his LOVE for us that held him to the cross.

The cross is suspended against a dark black sky. But a shaft of light is shining from Christ, and rays are breaking a path through the clouds at the foot of the cross and onto a lake beneath, and a bright blue horizon. Dawn is breaking, a new day is beginning.

John starts his gospel with a prologue, where we find Jesus introduced as the light of the world. I am going to finish with some verses from the prologue. John writes: *what came into being in him [that is, Jesus] was life and the life was the light of all peoples. The light [continues to] shines in the darkness and the darkness can never put it out.*

