

Maundy Thursday

So, today we meet together to remember the meal that Jesus shared with his disciples on the night before he died.

And what a significant occasion it was; as it was to be the last meal Jesus was to share with his friends before his dying and rising again.

Not much more than a year ago, we invited some friends to a meal in our vicarage in Wrexham. Sue and Pete, our next door neighbours were moving at Lancaster. We were moving down to Kent. Katie and Ed were staying in Wales and Chris and Carolyn were considering a job offer in Skelmersdale.

There was a real sense of sadness that we would not all be living in the same place again; and yet also a real sense of love and expectation about what the future held for each family.

We shared stories about the past, hopes for the future, laughed, almost cried, and prayed for each other.

Perhaps the last supper was something like that.

As I ponder the last supper, it seems to me that there are three significant aspects to it. Firstly, Jesus washed the disciples' feet.

This is, of course, an acted parable.

The bible is full of such parables or prophetic actions:

Ezekiel eats a scroll. Jeremiah buries his underpants. Hosea marries a prostitute.

As Jesus stoops to do the job of a slave, he makes two points: one that the disciples need Jesus to serve them – to die for them – so that they might be cleansed from their sin and put right with God.

Two: that the disciples must follow his example, and in love put the needs of others before their own.

You know, I think putting others first in church is a really tough thing.

We get involved in church because it does something for us; to then do things in a way that might not be so helpful to us but is helpful to others is really hard.

And we do things in church because we discover God has given us a gift or talent and we want to use it to glorify him and to help others. But sometimes we are called not to exercise our gift or talent, which we enjoy and makes us feel useful, but rather to encourage others to develop the same gift or talent.

The second aspect to the last supper is Jesus' institution of Holy Communion.

Of course, this is intimately linked to his washing the disciples' feet.

The way that Jesus will serve the disciples is by dying for them.

He will die in their place; taking the punishment for their sin; offering himself as a sacrifice; redeeming them.

This is Jesus' act of supreme love; the act that will change the course of human history and for those who will accept it, their eternity.

Here as Jesus takes bread and breaks it, he gives his followers another acted parable, by which they might remember this act of supreme love;
By which they might draw close to Christ,
By which they might feed upon him spiritually – in their hearts by faith with thanksgiving.

The bread and wine to not do anything in and of themselves; by they are the means by which Jesus has chosen to make himself present to his followers and by which he deigns to nourish believing hearts.

The third aspect of the last supper, and perhaps the more neglected one, is Jesus' teaching and prayer.

John does not record Jesus' institution of Communion. He leaves that to the other three Gospel writers, and he has already recorded in chapter 6 of his gospel how Jesus told that unless you feed upon him you will not have life.

But John does record two and half chapters of Jesus' teaching and a chapter of prayer.

In these we have Jesus' assurance that he will be resurrected after his death;

His assurance that he is going to heaven to prepare a place for the disciples;

His promise of the Holy Spirit;

His injunction to remain in him, like branches in a vine; and to be fruitful;

In his prayer Jesus asks God for the safekeeping of his disciples and all who will follow them; and that they might be united.

It's said that last words can reveal much about a person's heart.

Thomas Becket allegedly ended his life saying, "I am ready to die for my Lord that in my blood the church may obtain liberty and peace."

At the Reformation, as he was being burned at the stake, Latimer said to Ridley, "Be of good cheer master Ridley and play the man, for we shall light such a candle this day in England as I trust by God's grace shall never go out."

These men died in the hope that their lives would change the world; their nation and the church, for the better. Their last words reflect this hope.

Jesus died with the same motive.

And in the last supper, we eavesdrop on Jesus' last words to his disciples before that death.

The disciples were confused as to the meaning of Jesus' words; they needed to go through Jesus' death, resurrection and being filled with God's Spirit, to even begin to comprehend the implications of what Jesus was doing.

We must too.

But as we do, we can begin to gain a glimpse the sheer wonder of the fact that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him might not die, but have eternal life.

And as we do, we can begin to gain an insight into role we have in the life of God's kingdom; and the glory to which we have access through Christ.

Jesus in this last hours with his disciples before his death, gives them the instructions they need, the encouragement to press on with his work, a hope for the future; and he prays for them and us.