

## 2018 Maundy Thursday

Jerusalem was crowded, really crowded that week when Jesus came from the Galilee with his closest friends to keep the Passover festival.

It is reckoned that as many as 300,000 Jews from all over the known world came. Even Gentiles who associated with their local synagogue made the journey. No wonder the Roman occupiers got nervous about the crowds. After all it was a festival about freedom and their occupation of Palestine was about fear and control.

For big events like this, Pilate would come from his usual home on the sea coast at Caesarea Maritima and take up residence – probably not with his soldiers in the spartan Antonia Fortress but in Herod's luxurious palace.

Jerusalem was a potent mix of fear and excitement that last week of Jesus' life. Jerusalem is still pretty much that a lot of the time.

In the midst of this intense week, having created a near riot in the Temple according to three of the gospels, Jesus gathers in an upper room to keep the feast of Unleavened Bread, the Passover. It will turn out to be his last supper. It will turn out to be his last intimate encounter with those he loved best, except for the heartbreaking brief conversation with his mother Mary and the most beloved disciple as he is dying on the cross.

At the time, the disciples barely understand what Jesus does next. Later they will write an early hymn and sing, 'Let us have the same mind as he had... though equal to God, he emptied himself taking the form of a slave.' And they told of the night he washed their feet, as if he *really was* their slave whose only purpose was to meet their needs.

But they knew what had been done in that simple act of washing their dusty feet went way beyond what any other servant had ever carried out. Jesus had said that night that they did not yet understand. And he also said that they would be blessed when they did, and did the same themselves. Which they discovered to be true.

Have you ever held a newborn baby and gazed into the baby's face? Have you ever exchanged promises 'from this day forward, for better for worse' while gazing into the face of the beloved? Have you ever conversed deeply with another and held them in your gaze as good or difficult things were said? Perhaps as they were dying? Have you ever felt held in the gaze of God? When she had run away to the desert because she was mistreated, Hagar, Sarah's rejected slave girl was 'seen' by God who preserved her life. Hagar called God, 'The One who has seen me.'

That night in the upper room, an intimate exchange between Jesus and the disciples, was later called a moment of being seen and of seeing. It is no light thing to be seen. I regularly take Holy Communion to a very prayerful woman who is almost

completely bedridden. Few of you will know her, though for a time when well, she worshipped here.

She recently said to me, 'I see your priesthood, and I see that you were born for this.' When I read her email, I wept for the sheer relief of being seen; of being held in the gaze of such a prayerful and loving person.

We say of the sacraments that they are 'outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace.' This is the night when we celebrate the gift of the sacrament of Holy Communion with God, through the outward signs of bread and wine and the inward grace of growing into the likeness of Christ. And this is the night when we wash feet, though we often fail to name the sacramental in that simple action. Surely the sacramental is as much in the gaze that passes between us, that is between God, whose human face is Jesus, and we failing humans, as in the water that cleanses.

In the midst of that tense and crowded city, surely this night and that room was an oasis of encounters, a place where Jesus and the disciples forgot the clamour of the crowds for a time, and simply looked upon one another in wonder as Jesus served them, and as he broke bread to share it, and then passed them a common cup of wine to share.

One who looked, Judas, would look upon Jesus again later that night, this time in an act of betrayal. But the consequences of that failure to be willing to be held in God's gaze, a failure we all share one way or another, are for tomorrow's reflections.