

# A Tough and Genuine Alternative

Sermon for Maundy Thursday, 29 March 2018

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor, ACT

Exodus 12: 1-14; Psalm 116; 10-12, 14-17; 1 Corinthians 11: 23-26; John 13: 1-17, 31b-35

The Revd Canon Professor Scott Cowdell, Honorary Associate Priest

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Tonight, in our first gathering for the Easter Triduum, we begin to see how Jesus is changing the world. Tonight, we gather to witness and to unpack his radical action in offering his own body to be broken for us, and in the seemingly undignified and degrading action of washing his disciples' feet. And when I say action, I mean 'action' the way that activists mean it. But, friends, this isn't the familiar activism of angry one-upmanship and tit for tat. Rather, Jesus' activism of loving service and self-giving offers a shakeup that undercuts our ideologies and our rusted-on habits of mind, and surely this is what our world needs—a shakeup that you and I are encouraged to experience and then to join in. Jesus' new commandment tonight, that we love one another—this mandate, this *mandatum*—provides the name for this Maundy Thursday, and it sets the agenda for all we the baptised to carry away from here tonight.

Now, it's too easy to bag the world of politics and politicians for failures of service and self-sacrifice. What a relief that we can now bag our cricketers instead, for giving in to rivalry and vulgar self-interest. Indeed, it's typical of us that we neglect our own culpability in the world's business as usual and blame others. We like to assert our superiority, clinging to our advantages, feeling free to be envious and rivalrous and complicit in violence—even if all we contribute is our gossip, our invective, or our silence. We fear being on the outer, being disadvantaged and, ultimately, we fear losing everything through failure, decline and ultimately death. So, we look out for number one, we fear losing our precious distinctiveness were we content just to fit in, or else we try obsessively to fit in in case we end up exposed and at risk.

But, friends, in baptism and Eucharist we discover a new sense of who we are and of life's meaning, also in the wonderful addendum to the Last Supper that John's Gospel gives us tonight, when Jesus washes his disciple's feet. So, what's it all about?

First, the foot washing. This is all about refusing the siren song of rivalry, of ambition, of me and mine before you and yours, of you win I lose, of all the prudential wisdom that we still teach our children when we train and educate them for success. Jesus' radical action with his disciples is stunning. He knows that, because

afterwards he asks them, 'do you know what I have done for you?' Jesus' action shows that it's not about being an insider, being a winner, and thereby somehow keeping at bay the fear of disadvantage and ultimately the fear of death. Instead, it's about discovering God's patient, non-intrusive, non-aggressive, change-making power, so our eyes come to dwell on God and the world God loves and not on our own main chance.

Now, it's important that we don't misunderstand and think that Jesus wants us to be servile. A lot of Christians labour under this misapprehension, and unfortunately many Christian women who've been taught to think that service means being a doormat. Here I'm struck by the exchange with Peter in the middle of tonight's gospel. Peter is very conscious of his smallness and of Jesus' greatness and so, at first, he refuses Jesus' washing of his feet. But when Jesus chides Peter that it's essential for Christians to be part of this, or else they can hardly be Christians at all, Peter the painfully self-conscious immediately corrects his mistake, insisting that Jesus go the whole hog, washing Peter's hands and head as well. But "No", says Jesus. "You're not filthy and unworthy, you're already clean, worthy and significant, and you mustn't forget it!" Peter gets a firm reassurance of his Christian dignity—that the disciples are already caught up in Jesus' life, so that Jesus is justified in trusting them with this commission, this mandate, to go and do likewise. In other words,

Jesus encourages Peter and us to think more confidently of ourselves as Christians, to claim our place by right alongside Jesus in God's loving mission to the world, to not think of ourselves as unworthy, to not assume that being God's agent, God's minister, is for other people but not for us. Yes, the mission is a humble, self-effacing one, but it requires a sense of our own dignity, our own purpose, to dare to step up and embrace it.

And speaking of daring, Jesus then undertakes the most radical action of all. In the Last Supper, which was already being carried on in the Church when Paul came along and handed on the tradition, as we hear in tonight's epistle, Jesus gives himself entirely in the face of the world's evil—Jesus becomes food to sustain us as we go and do likewise.

Now, this self-offering by Jesus on the cross and in the Eucharist isn't about placating an angry God, with Jesus undergoing punishment in our place. Friends, *we're the punishers*, not God. The religious and political anxieties of the day, Jewish and Roman—anxieties that are still alive and well in our world and in our hearts today—are what punishes Jesus, because he calls the whole system into question.

We might be happy to talk about God if by God we mean what grounds and guarantees and preserves the system, and which

represents the projection of our favourite prejudices. But what if God isn't effectively our own creation, confined to this familiar scripted role in support of the *status quo*? What if, instead, God is real, and unconventionally different? What if, instead, God invades the system in person in order to expose the system, bringing instead a whole new creation that runs on a whole different logic?

Friends, in this Maundy Thursday Eucharist, this Christian Passover, we don't see God's violence meted out against our enemies, as we saw in the old Passover account from our Exodus reading tonight. Instead, we see the whole impulse of human violence absorbed into God's own life in Jesus Christ, and taken responsibility for, and undone from the inside of history.

Popular notions of an aggressive, violent God only produce aggressive, violent human beings. But a God who undermines the *status quo* in the radical Eucharistic action of Jesus Christ, self-offering for the life of the world, opens a new world beyond violent self-justification, a world where unity and peace might at last have a chance.

Friends, where we prefer to tear apart those we blame for whichever set of problems, Jesus steps up and is himself torn apart—not to satisfy some pagan impulse or in tune with some ancient myth, but

as a tough and genuine historical alternative to the whole inexorable grind of history. And friends, where can *today's* world look for that tough and genuine alternative? The most alarming news for us tonight, but also the most consoling, is that Jesus calls us, Jesus trusts us, to be signs of that tough and genuine alternative in our own Church, and in our own lives.

The Lord be with you ...