

SERMON: Maundy Thursday 18 April – Rev Alistair Cowper

**“The Resurrecting Power of Love”
(Exodus 12:1-14 and John 13:1-17, 31b-35)**

I wanted to call this sermon, the resurrecting power of love because I think we see the full measure of divine love in the act of Jesus washing his disciples feet.

John tells us that,

All throughout his time with his disciples, Jesus had demonstrated a deep and tender love for them. And now he longed to show them the full measure of his love. (13:1)

And I think he probably is referring to not just the foot washing and the taking the place of a servant but also of the fulfilment of love being his death on the cross which would happen the very next day. Some of called that Christ’s enthronement or Christ’s glorification.

And for all of this, the power behind it all is the resurrecting power of love which Jesus modelled and made possible for humanity. And the story makes it clear that God wants everyone to experience for themselves the love and life of Christ.

But let’s step back to the context of why Jesus and his friends were sharing this meal together.

The Book of Exodus tells us that the people of Israel were captive in Egypt for 430 years (12:40). That’s a long time! Maybe 17 generations?

Notice that what was once the place of salvation had become the place of captivity.

Israel had moved to Egypt, where Joseph was Prince, to escape famine in Canaan. When they arrived in Egypt they were given “the best land” (Genesis 47:6) and they soon prospered and became “extremely powerful and filled the land” (Exodus 2:7).

But then a new king comes to power and there is a rise of nationalism and a fear that the Hebrews would become too powerful so the new king makes them his slaves. The place of salvation became the place of slavery.

And where was God?

How long Lord, how long? My God, my God, why have you forsaken us?

It's part of the human condition to experience times where God is distant. In fact for some of us it even feels like that God's silence is God's absence.

And so it is comforting when we read, as we often do in the Bible, words like, 'and God remembered their cry'.

Early in the book of Exodus, we find out that God has heard the cry for freedom from captivity. And Moses is told that God has a plan. God's going to rescue his people in his own way. They're going to have to trust God.

So there are these strange signs of God's power - staffs turning into snakes, hands becoming leprous, the river turning to blood, frogs everywhere, gnats and flies, plagues and boils, hail and locusts, darkness and death.

And after that, a new thing, something to do with lambs and goats, blood on doorposts, bread without yeast and bitter herbs, something the whole community were to do together, with their loins girded up, sandals on their feet, and walking sticks in hand.

The first Passover was to take place in the first month of a new year, a new season for people to move with God, where the blood of the lamb or the goat, free from defect, would offer protection from death.

The shed blood of the lamb would signal a new season of life marked by freedom from years of captivity.

You can see why John the apostle of Jesus makes so many clear links between the story of Israel's exodus to the saving work of Jesus as the Christ.

Behold the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29).

John tells us that the night before Jesus was killed, along with all the other lambs being slaughtered in Jerusalem for the passover, that Jesus sat down to supper with his friends. He knew his time had come for his exodus from this world.

He knew that his authority came from God and he was returning to God. He'd already surrendered his whole life into the care of God. He'd given it over completely. He'd laid it down and so was free to keep going in order to bring things to a proper conclusion, reach a fitting end, and make all things complete -

this is why the New Testament refers to Jesus as the author and the finisher of the faith (Hebrews 12:3), because it all begins with Christ and it will all be made complete with Christ.

But of course there's life in this for us too. Whenever we entrust our past, present and future into God's care, we can find a freedom to keep going and know our lives are becoming more complete.

Jesus shows us how to begin and end in love. Love is the real power at work in his life. It's not the power of evil, the lure of money or the attraction of status or the temptation to violence. No, these things he'd already laid down and continue to resist and cast aside, so as to be free to love and let the love flow.

The very act of having to take off his robe in order to wash his disciples' feet is a sign that he is able to set aside worldly authority in order to let divine love rule his way and order his steps.

What we see in this picture is perfect love casting out all fear, with no sense of pride, only perfect humility.

Jesus is the Great Example which he invites his friends to follow.

"I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you" (13:15).

For the last two Maundy Thursdays, in Stirling, I persuaded some of us in the church to take this quite literally, and down through the centuries lots of churches continue to follow the servant example of Jesus in this way. But rather than wash feet we gathered in the main street outside the church building under a sign which read, 'Jesus washed feet, we polish shoes'. [SLIDE]

There was never a queue of people waiting to have their shoes polished but it led to some great conversations and those who were humble enough to allow us to polish their shoes were blessed by having shiny feet.

"I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you" (13:15).

We can all make God's love real in practical ways. So if anyone fancies doing this sort of thing let me know. Like you, I'd be willing to try anything that will help people to grow in love.

Because time and time again we discover that love has the power to raise life to new heights.

Jesus' washing of his disciples feet would have had a huge impact on them. It would have stayed with them for the rest of their lives. I can imagine the disciples talking about it for years afterwards. 'Remember that night he washed our feet'.

The great example Jesus has set is the inspiration we need to do loving acts. We're to wash one another's feet. We're to demonstrate the love of Christ in our gatherings because the living presence of Christ is with us to ensure it.

I think we need to notice this from the story.

When it comes to Peter's turn to have his feet washed, Peter objects at first. And Jesus' response is interesting.

"Unless I wash you, you won't belong to me" (13:8). The Passion Translation puts it as,

"Peter, if you don't allow me to wash your feet," Jesus responded, "then you will not be able to share life with me".

Clearly, Jesus shows us that God wants us to enjoy and share the life of Christ with us. We're to get on with the business of washing one another's feet and do what Christ has done for us. We're to discover the depth of his love in our business together. Christ becomes real as we forgive one another and serve one another. It's so important to practise forgiveness of one another in order for the community to grow in love in such a way that outsiders begin to notice.

People must let themselves be washed by the presence of Christ among us and within us, and certainly need to know they are forgiven in Christ, as they forgive one another.

That's always the starting point for the new season which God is bringing. Allowing ourselves to be washed by the real presence of Christ in each other; having our feet washed regularly from the stuff that we pick up in life, the daily offences, which need to be cleaned off so that we can grow in love and let love grow in us and among us. It's about being quick to forgive one another and slow to take offence or become angry.

The Good News is that Christ's forgiving love is always available to us, its there to be received and enjoyed, to be lived in and lived out, enabling people to be quicker to forgive others, quicker to forgive themselves and know themselves forgiven.

Though we often stumble and fall, there is for us, the Lamb without blemish, who's unconditional and unfailing love is here to raise us up.

So, in all of this, may we continue to live out the fragrant love of Christ. May we aim to see all the people of Kirknewton and East Calder grow in love and may we commit ourselves to practising the servant way of Jesus for the good of our community and beyond.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.