

Maundy Thursday 2024

Some years ago, on a Holy Week Retreat I attempted to keep watch and pray through the night until dawn in a country church. There were about 20 of us but the church had no electricity and the night was pitch black. Before very long the cold and the dark had numbed both my mind and my body and not even the song of a nightingale calling across the silent churchyard could convince me that the sun would ever rise again. Somewhere between 3 and 4 o'clock in the morning I began to wonder if my watch battery was going flat. Time seemed to have ground to a halt.

Those of you who have been wide awake in the darkest hours of the night will know the mind's ability to doubt what in the harsh light of day will seem beyond question. Time surreptitiously slides out of its metronomic beat and the dependable laws of logic are temporarily lost.

Tonight we begin the great three days of the Christian faith – the Triduum, the only days in the Christian year which are marked out in real time, hour by hour, even minute by minute. And this evening we have reached the point when Jesus says 'his hour has come'.

Jesus is speaking to his disciples on the night before he was betrayed. The three Synoptic gospels mark this as the night of the Passover meal when Jesus took bread and wine and told them it was his body and blood – marking it out as the night of the institution of the Last Supper. John's Gospel makes no direct mention of the Last Supper but does refer to a meal with his disciples taking place at night. Perhaps the early church for whom John was writing had already placed the eucharist at the centre of their worshipping life. Some suggest that the whole of John's Gospel is an extended meditation on the Eucharist, but with Matthew, Luke and Mark all placing the institution of the Last Supper on the night before Jesus was crucified surely, we must assume that this had just happened. John clearly tells us Jesus was sharing a meal with the disciples before the atmosphere begins to change.

This was surely the darkest and longest night in human history, the night when the Son of God was betrayed by one of his own disciples, the night when Jesus would beg his closest friends to stay awake and pray that they might not lose the fight against the forces of evil, the night which was unfolding against a backdrop of betrayal and denial, the night when the over-fed and over-indulged would be unable to even stay awake for an hour let alone to pray, the night which would bring arrest, condemnation, lies, political expediency and torture and finally, death. It was night.

And against this darkest of nights, Jesus says Listen to me as I tell you about glory. It seems almost beyond belief, doesn't it? How could he talk of glory at a time like this? And where was the glory in the events which were already beginning to unfold?

To begin to understand what this glory might be Jesus gives the disciples a foretaste. He takes a towel and a basin and washes the disciples' feet. An act of outrageous, tender, self-giving and healing love. He gives an example of the depth of God's self-emptying love as he, in whom all creatures and creation came into being, stoops down into the dirt of the earth and washes their feet. It is an enacted parable of love. And he does this on the night before he will be crucified – so that when they witness the events which are about to unfold in these most holy days, they might begin to see them as the glory of God's love in action.

Jesus said, 'Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, "Where I am going, you cannot come." I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. '

Little children, says Jesus. It's the only time in the Gospels he uses this phrase. He is speaking so tenderly to them. Little children, there isn't much time left. I give you a new commandment. Love one another. Just as I have loved you. Love one another. Then everyone will know that you are my disciples.

These are some of the final words he speaks before he is taken away by the soldiers. His mandate – his commandment – is to love. And we mustn't forget that it is Jesus' love for his disciples (even the ones who would deny and desert him) which shows us that no-one is to be excluded from this love. Just as the Father has loved me, and I have loved you, so you must love one another. Love is to be the distinguishing mark of the Church because love is the distinguishing mark of God's glory. A mark which will be so clear that even those outside the Church will recognise its authenticity.

The mark of the Church is love, the very essence of the Church, must be to show forth God's all-embracing and all including love, even in the darkest of times, even the times when the sun seems to have set and will never rise again.

Because into our darkness our Saviour came to reveal the fullness of his glory, a love which cost not less than everything, a love without limit. Into our darkest night came the fullness of the glory of the one who gave up his very life that we might not die but live in glory with him.

He shines in the darkest of our nights. He shines in glory this night as he will shine in glory on the cross. In whatever darkness we may know. In the darkest of our nights when we even doubt the sun will rise again. In the darkest nights of this world. There God's utter love shines forth. The glory which reveals the love of the Father, and the love the disciples must share with one another.

Because love never dies. Nothing can destroy it. No darkest of nights, no terrors or despair because even there, love has triumphed and always will.

So, this night we are to go like Christ, into both the ordinariness of our ordinary lives, as well as into the darkest places of this world's pain, and find within them that Christ is harrowing the darkness with his love and asking us to do the same.

For as John told us at in the first chapter of his Gospel, *'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.'*

The Rev'd Claire Robson