

John 13:1-17, 34-35 How low will you go?

How many of you are old enough to remember the limbo, where people had to dance or rather penguin waddle under a regularly lowered rope or bar and Chubby Checker's song "Limbo Rock" in which he asked: "How low can you go?" ? We will return to the limbo, but let's go on to review the events of that first Maundy Thursday.

It was a tense and troubling time for Jesus and his followers. Chief priest Caiaphas had chillingly declared that it was "better to have one man die for the people, instead of having the whole nation destroyed". Caiaphas assumed that Jesus was another self-proclaimed Messiah who would lead an armed revolt against their Roman rulers, which would lead to another brutal crackdown on the Jewish people. On that advice the Jewish religious leaders had ordered that at the first opportunity rabbi Jesus was to be arrested and tried for various offenses including blasphemy.

But Jesus too had spoken about going through a time of suffering, about a single grain dropping into the ground and dying in order to produce a crop of many grains, and about being among them only a little longer. So it was rather ominous when Jesus decided to celebrate the Passover feast one day early. What took place, then, at that Passover feast was just as puzzling and just as troubling for the disciples. First, Jesus took a towel and washed his disciples' feet. Then, in celebrating the Passover meal, as he handed out the bread and the wine, he spoke those fateful words: "This is my body, broken for you; this is my blood shed for you." And finally, after the meal he dropped two bombshell pronouncements into their midst: "One of you here is going to betray me to my enemies" and "Peter, you are going to disown me three times."

No wonder Peter asks: "Where are you going, Lord?" In other words, what's going on here? What's this all about? He and no doubt the other disciples were totally confused and mystified. No wonder Jesus says to them: "You do not understand now what I am doing, but you will understand later. You cannot follow me now where I am going, but later you **will** follow me." But in retelling these events in his Gospel preacher John summarises the meaning for us: "Having loved his own. ... Jesus now showed them the full extent of his love." He also later quotes Jesus' own words: "As I have loved you, so you must love one another."

Well, friends, it's now much later. If we claim to be Christian, do we understand the significance of all that happened back then? And are we enabled by that to follow the way that Jesus went? I trust that we all are = but let me just remind you briefly of that significance and of its motivating power.

Dr. Martin Luther King once declared: "Everybody can be great." So what? That's what every media celebrity proclaims to the eager ears of our world. They proclaim the great modern myth: "Just put your heart and mind into what you want to be, and you can be that. You can be great and admired like me." But Luther King was a Christian, and he went on to proclaim the truth Jesus taught and demonstrated: "Everybody can be great, because anybody can be a servant!" There's a huge difference here, isn't there. For so many people, greatness is about being high and mighty, wielding power over others, having one's own way. As one person neatly put it: Arrogance struts the corridors of power.

Such domination of others, such arrogant pride and selfishness, is not the Jesus way. In his words and actions on that first Maundy Thursday Jesus told his followers that he did not come to win this worldly power and greatness. Instead he declared that he came to reveal that true human greatness is about how greatly we can love and serve others. In this way he shows selfish and power-hungry people like you and me, for that's what we are all like by nature, that there is a far better way to live. As he said: "The world will know that we are his followers, if we love others, as he has loved us."

Imagine what a difference such an attitude would make in the world! What if every business owner's focus was how best to serve his customers and then what would be best for his staff? What if every teacher's constant concern was on helping all his or her students to be better students and better people? What if every politician would be actively thinking and planning what might be best for all people in the state or nation? What if each one of us, whenever and wherever we interact with another person, were to have in our minds these thoughts: "What can I do for you?" "How can I help you?" "What is the loving thing to do in this situation?"

We need to realize, however, that it's not just a matter of knowing that's how we should live and then doing it. No, our sinful and selfish hearts are constantly dragging us in the opposite direction. We need a deeper motivation. Our hearts need to be constantly renewed and transformed. And they will be, when we see that the newness of Jesus' "new command" to love others lies in the simple words "as I have loved you." When we see the full extent of Jesus' love – not just that he washed his disciples' feet, but that he went all the way to crucifixion and death for us – then we will join Isaac Watts in declaring "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all."

There we see how much God in Christ loved us, and there we will find the strength to resist ego-trips and power plays and instead to serve others in love. So let's finish where we began. As we have recalled tonight how Jesus got down on his hands and knees to wash his disciples' dirty feet, let's use the Limbo Rock refrain to challenge ourselves: "How low can I go to love and serve others?" and to challenge our fellow followers of Jesus: "How low can you go in loving service to those around you?"