

The Command to Love

On the evening before Jesus died he gave his disciples and those who were with him at supper a new command: “love one another as I have loved you.” It was a command that embodied an action which was radical and for those present shocking. At the same time it was an action which was purposeful and full of symbol and significance. Jesus wanted to show his friends that the meaning of love in the context of his life, and by implication in the lives of those who responded to his call, was not simply concerned with expressing a generosity of spirit. No, love meant sacrifice. It meant placing yourself in a position of vulnerability and of risk, because it meant offering yourself up to the possibility of failure and rejection. The love which Jesus expressed was the giving of self. Totally, completely and above all freely for the other. It was the embodiment and expression of his relationship with the Father and to demonstrate how this love was to be understood, he began to wash the disciples’ feet. This was a deed which even slaves were not expected to undertake, which is why Peter and the others were so shocked.

We are well aware of the power of sign and symbol. In our society whole industries are built upon such a concept, and all of us carry the logos of different institutions and charities, displaying their emblem as a mark of our support. The sea of red poppies that has been created at the Tower of London is testament to just how evocative symbols can become. A jug, a bowl and a towel are pretty basic ordinary objects, which of themselves hold no great persuasive characteristics. But put them in the context of our vocation to love as Jesus commanded us, then we see how these ordinary everyday items are transformed through the power of what they have become. A jug is no longer just a vessel which holds water, rather in the hands of the Christian it is the means through which we are called upon to pour out our love sacrificially into tasks which perhaps we would rather not do. A bowl is no longer simply a receptacle, but becomes an opportunity for us to gather together broken lives that might otherwise feel valueless and unappreciated. A towel is not simply a piece of cloth with which to dry our bodies, but becomes the metaphor by which we can bind and soothe the wounds of those who feel hurt and offended.

We are meeting this weekend to look at ourselves as a parish. To see what it is we can offer as a community and as individuals to those alongside us. If we are challenged to respond, then let it be as Jesus shows and desires. Let jug, bowl and towel be used in our Parish and in our families as signs and symbols that witness to his sacrificing love. Let our welcome be a welcome that evokes his presence amongst us, let our worship be a worship that offers hope and thanksgiving through praise and joy. Let our outreach be an outreach that is open and willing to accept through compassion and care. Let our parish tell its story through these simple, earthy and everyday vessels which have their place in every household of the parish. Let them remind us that this new commandment to love is extraordinary and inexhaustible in its power to transform lives which feel undervalued or unacknowledged. Let the actions which flow from this outpouring be selfless and uninhibited, willing to take the risk that is inherent in that command of Christ to *love each other as I have loved you*.