**Bishop Christopher’s Maundy Thursday Sermon 2020**

There is always for me a poignancy in reading this account of the sinning woman bathing Jesus’ feet with her tears, drying them with her hair, kissing them and anointing them with ointment just a few hours before we recall Jesus washing his disciples’ feet and a couple of days before, as St Luke records, the women came to anoint his body but found the tomb empty.

The woman’s actions were out of love and affection. Over recent years I’ve spoken at this gathering of my affection for you as friends and fellow disciples in the ministries we share in the mission of the Gospel, and my appreciation of your support and care for me. I feel as daunted as ever and as privileged as ever, as in this new way, I try to be both real with you and encouraging and supportive too. I express now my affection, and my pride in being your bishop.

I hope that despite the physical distance that separates us you can feel something of that this morning, and that we can find solidarity and support in each other and from God in these unusual times. The deepest affection and love, as Jesus’ host Simon fails to understand, has nothing to do with being right or wrong, sinner or saint, whether we agree or not on this or that, but with our self-understanding of being in need of forgiveness. From a deep need of forgiveness springs the possibility of bearing great fruit in love.

So, I invite you to come today to this unique renewal of commitment to discipleship, lay and ordained, licensed, authorised, mandated, commissioned or whatever, in the spirt of this woman. She got to her knees and showed love. And Jesus did not just thank her or take it as a nice gesture but was fulsome in his commendation of her and sent her away forgiven and in peace. We are invited today to sink to our knees before our Lord and others, and also to allow our own feet to be washed.

Unlike Peter who tonight resisted having Jesus wash his feet, we must allow ourselves to be reminded of our need and our limitations and to receive the grace of Jesus Christ out of which all true ministry comes. Our feet need washing by Jesus first before we can serve others.

Deacons know that from their ordination, though for some of us that was so long ago or was considered then an eccentric liturgical innovation to be avoided, that it is at best a distant memory. Only in constant acceptance of our need of Jesus’ love and of having our feet washed will we have the compassion and the joy to serve others.

At this time of distancing, isolation, illness and death, which we can expect to continue and to increase, we will more and more need those graces of compassion and joy as well as courage to be disciples and ministers. The burden of anxiety and grief in our parishioners will be heavy, and our responsibility will be to serve our parishes and people, not only our congregations, with love. This may not be easy. Human beings seem strangely hard wired to be competitive; some people know they are, and that’s a good thing, but it’s not attractive in ministry and certainly not now. Our workload, or our tiredness, our skills in streaming, our number of Facebook Likes or our cumulative Zoom time, are of no matter. We are ministers of the good news of faith, hope and love.

I know there is lots of wonderful creativity and innovation in your ministries alongside a return to traditional pastoral encounters, at two metre distances or on the phone. You are aware too of the many not able to access the internet and social media, those on the margins of communities, homeless people on our streets and lanes, elderly people unable to have visitors, children going hungry without school meals, relatives who can’t visit their loved one with Covid-19, mourners unable to attend a funeral, those hungry or in increasing debt, those in prison and their frightened loved ones, and others too.

The Church, and particularly a Church which wishes to be the Church for and of England, must be as bold and determined, as generous and loving as the woman who found a way into a pharisee’s house and washed, dried, kissed and anointed Jesus’ no doubt smelly feet. We are being called to do in and for our communities what we never wished to do, but must and will do. We must look to love, looking not to our own interests as parishes or as individuals but to others’ needs above our own, for Jesus loves them and seeks to serve them and wash their feet as well as ours.

There is a more sombre tone to this pared back service than usual. You and I face challenges we had never anticipated or prepared for. So, in confusion or uncertainty we must care for each other and ourselves, especially where some live alone or minister without close colleagues, and where home life has special pressures. We cannot meet all this alone, nor in our own strength, which is why this occasion is so uniquely important as we acknowledge our dependence on God and our deep need for his sustaining and strengthening. Lauren will remind us later, as she addresses each one of us, that “He who calls you is faithful, and he will accomplish it.” With that assurance we have the sure and certain hope that in Jesus is the fulness of love and the joy of transformative life.