

Archbishop Stephen gave the sermon at the annual Chrism Eucharist at York Minster today

In St John's gospel, the story of the great three days that are the heart of our Christian faith, and which, for us, begin unusually this week on a Tuesday, are summed up in a single verse: "Having loved his own, who were in the world, he loved them to the end."

You can find those words at the beginning of John Chapter 13. They will be the gospel set for our eucharists on Thursday evening.

And for those who know the story, but don't know the story, when, after supper, and knowing his end is near, and that God has put all things into his hands, and possessed by a special sense of divine commission and authority, Jesus rises from the table, you might assume – as my esteemed predecessor, William Temple, put it – that he will 'order a throne to be (put in place) that he may receive the homage of his subjects.'

But if you know the story, and know the meaning and depth of the story, then you know that it was not for such a purpose, and never could be, for Jesus is among us, as one who serves, and in him we learn that this, self-emptying, and ever giving service is the very nature of God; not God, becoming a servant for a season, but a revelation of the very heart of God, that God is love, and those who live in God, live in love. And so it is, that taking a towel and a basin of water, Jesus washes his disciples feet.

And this isn't easy. Again, as Temple puts it, 'We are ready, perhaps, to be humble before God; but we are (not so sure) that we want God to be humble in His dealings with us.'

But because it is love, the love that Paul will go on to tell us has no limits or boundaries, then it is both beautiful, and very hard to receive.

Sometimes we think that we are not worthy at all. Or judge others either more worthy than us, or really not worthy at all. Or else we think that something this precious needs limits and conditions put around it. And sometimes, perhaps, because we have not worked out how to receive it, we just refuse it, or even scoff at its unseemly generosity.

Peter says, 'Wash all of me, or none of me.' Judas has his feet washed, and then goes out to betray Jesus to his enemies.

But Jesus persists. He loves to the end. Because this is what love does. He washes the disciples feet. Peter and Judas. And he says to them, I give you a new commandment: love one another as I have loved you.

And if you know the story, and know the meaning and depth of the story, and can also find yourself in the story, then, at this point, you may just recoil or wince for – and here I have to say we not you – we know our own betrayals all too well, our refusals, and the limits we place on love. And the many ways in which we don't love or serve each other.

And Jesus persists. He loves to the end. Because this is what love does. This is how people will know you are my disciples, says Jesus: not your good works, nor your fine words; not because you'll always get everything right, not because you always agree with one another, but by your love.

Our world needs the story and example of this love. It is the only way we will secure peace in Ukraine. It is the only way we will learn to live lightly on the Earth. It is the only way we will ensure the poorest in our land have the food and fuel and dignity, so often denied them by the inequalities

of wealth and opportunity that we have learned to tolerate.

Our church needs the story and example of this love, for we are divided on various issues and sometimes tempted to conclude that we don't need each other. But love, the love that Jesus demonstrates by washing all our feet, shows us that this is not an option. We cannot choose our fellow disciples. We cannot even choose whether Jesus washes us or not, but we can wash each other's feet.

And today's gospel gives us one such wonderful example of this, also showing how Jesus is able to receive as well as give service, and of how the service offered flows from a heart that is full of love because it is also replete with forgiveness and mercy received.

The polite, the sensible, and the very religious are offended by this. But the woman at the centre of this story first weeps to be in the presence of Jesus, then washes his feet with her tears, and dries them with her hair. And, as a further scandal to those who like their religion carefully ordered so we all get what we deserve, Jesus even says that her astonishing acts of service are proof she's been forgiven.

My heart, your heart, all our hearts, so weary by the trials and challenges of life, and often broken by life's difficulties and grief, needs these stories: the example of Jesus, and the example of this unnamed woman, a forgiven sinner like us.

Dear friends, thank you for being here. Tell your colleagues who are not here that we love them and we need them.

Together, let's show the world a better way, and tell the world a better story, so that loving one another and receiving from one another, even with our disagreements, we may reach out in service to the world.

'I am among you', says Jesus, 'as one who serves.'

So let me finish with a story. I first heard this story told by a Jesuit priest, but I think it comes from the folk tradition of Cherokee Indians. An old warrior tells his grandson about a battle that goes on inside people.

He says, my son, the battle is between two wolves inside us all. One is evil, though it often dresses convincingly in the clothes of what is good, so self-confidently sure of itself that even its apparent goodness tramples over others. It can end up gaining its own perfect world, but losing its soul. But you know it is evil, because inside you there is anger, envy, jealousy, greed, arrogance, self-pity, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego.

The other wolf is good. Often misunderstood and overlooked, but always transparently itself. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith.

His grandson thought about the story for a minute and then asked his Grandfather: 'Which wolf wins?' The old warrior simply replied: 'The one you feed.'

You can watch the whole service [here](#)



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