

The Pyramid of Power

Sermon for Maundy Thursday, 28th March 2024

Readings [1 Corinthians 11.23-26](#), [John 13.1-17, 31b-35](#)

Shakespeare begins Henry V by describing what everyone in the theatre will have to do if the drama is to work: 'Can this cockpit hold the vasty fields of France?' Yes it can – if the audience does its bit. So, he says, 'Let us on your imaginary forces work.'

Our imaginary forces have been working quite hard. On Palm Sunday, the church garden was the Mount of Olives and this building became Jerusalem. And our imagination's eye saw Jesus riding on in majesty.

This evening, we have the imaginative challenge not of magnifying but of miniaturising: this space, which on Sunday was a tiny box to represent a whole city, is now a cavernous hall in which we must picture a very intimate scene, because tonight the drama of Holy Week moves from the public to the private, from city streets and temple to an upstairs room in a house. Tonight our imaginary forces must drop the ceiling and pull in the walls.

The gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke describe Jesus and his disciples keeping the Passover tonight, and Passover requires people to use their imaginations rather as a play does.

They need to recall how God rescued their ancestors from slavery in Egypt, and the Passover meal helps them do this. There are bitter herbs and salt water for the taste of slavery and tears; unleavened bread, recalling the stuff baked in a hurry on the night of the escape; sweet things for the taste of liberty; and at several points, glasses of wine for thanks and praise.

The aim is to make a leap of imagination. The Haggadah, the Passover handbook, says that in every generation Jewish people are obliged to see themselves as though *they* went out from Egypt.

That may be hard in Jesus' day, when they are once more under a foreign power (not Egypt this time but Rome). I suspect it will be hard for our Jewish neighbours this year, celebrating a freedom's feast against the background of deepening hunger in Gaza, and the fate of hostages still held there. Let us pray that something has changed for the good by the time Passover begins next month.

In his address on Monday, Fr Stephen gave us a word for the events of Holy Week, and it certainly applies tonight – *ambivalence*, holding opposite feelings at the same time.

First, there is the occasion of Passover itself, when the story world and the lived world don't match.

Then, as St Paul tells us, Jesus takes the already symbolic food of bread and wine, signs of joy and gratitude, and identifies them with his death – this is my body; this is the new deal with God, sealed with my blood. He instructs them to do the same thing in remembrance of him, as we do tonight, again as though we were there (and for the first time in four years we share the wine as well as the bread).

And then, when John gives his account of this Last Supper, there is another piece of ambivalence. The disciples arrive, having walked through the dust and dung of the streets, and there is no one to wash their feet at the door. It's an unattractive job, reserved for a child or a slave, and none of them thinks that should be his job on this holy night. So Jesus does it himself, going round each smelly foot in turn.

It is an awkward moment, but there is more to it than just embarrassment. Jesus does it not show them up but to show them – and us – who he is and what he is about.

I experienced a tiny version of this here last November. We hosted a meeting of the Awareness Foundation, a charity that does great work in the Middle East. Guest of honour was Sophie, Duchess of Edinburgh. We lined up on the portico to receive her.

Now there is a protocol for these things: as the senior cleric on parade I was supposed to greet the Duchess and then introduce her to everyone else. But when the car arrived she strode up the steps and immediately hugged the brother and sister who ran the charity – she knew them well. No doubt she was aware of the form, but she showed that she wanted to do things relationally rather than hierarchically.

So it is with Jesus, except that what was relaxed and natural on the portico is squirmingly uncomfortable round the dinner table. It is intolerable for Peter – I can't let you wash my feet, he says. He doesn't understand: in a world that sees everything in terms of hierarchy, the pyramid – who's at the top and who's at the bottom – Jesus is instead creating a body in which each person, each member, has a place. So Jesus tells Peter, if I don't wash your feet, you can't be part of what I am creating.

Notice now how Peter tries to renegotiate the deal. Wash my hands and head as well! he says, to turn it into a grand gesture. But this is not a performative act. Jesus is only doing what needs doing, but *he* is the one doing it. He knows, says John, that the Father has given all things into his hands, and now he uses those hands to do a slave's job.

Jesus here doesn't abolish authority – You call me Teacher and Lord, he says, and I am – but he redefines it. Authority is still about leading people into what they might not want (Peter doesn't want Jesus washing his feet) but the aim of Jesus' authority is *service*, doing what's needed for the good of the other, not maintaining the pyramid of power. And Jesus tells them, very firmly, this is an example they should follow.

Now – as at Passover, so at the Last Supper – we need to see ourselves as though we were there. To help with that, we shall in a moment re-enact the scene. Some of us have our feet washed. All of us hear Jesus' words – You should do as I have done for you.

As we see ourselves there at Jesus' table, we each need nevertheless to remember who we are, to have in mind the authority we possess. But perhaps 'authority' is a word with too much wriggle room, so let's say *power*. What power do you or I have?

It may be power that comes from a job, a position, or from wealth. It may be the power of an older person over a younger, or the younger over the older. What does it mean for me, having the power that I have, to follow Jesus' example?

It means asking: this thing I might be about to do, what is it for, in the end? Who or what does it *serve*? And the people it will affect – could I do it if I had first washed their feet?

Do you understand what I have done for you? Jesus asks. How different would things be in church and world if we could say Yes to that? But we don't – I don't – not down here in the guts, so well established is the idea – the idol – of the pyramid of power as the way the world works.

It was the same in Jesus' day, as we shall see. Tonight Jesus' hands wash dirty feet. Tomorrow they will be nailed to a cross, and he will be discarded, at the bottom of the pile, once more in the place of the slave. Tonight his hands cause embarrassment. Tomorrow they will suffer torture as the pyramid strikes back.

Yet these are the hands into which the Father has put all things.

Note The pyramid / body distinction is from *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus* by Jean Vanier, founder of the L'Arche Community. His insight into the use and misuse of power was one he failed to apply to his own position within the community, as its report into allegations of sexual abuse has now established.