



A sermon for the Solemn Eucharist of the Last Supper at Wells Cathedral, preached on Thursday 2 April by the Reverend Dr Kate Bruce, RAF Chaplain

The Eucharist of the Last Supper on Maundy Thursday

Exodus 12: 1-14 and John 13: 1-17 & 31b-35

The theme of our Holy Week sermons is: Moving Deeper into Love. Hold that thought.

Picture the scene at that last meal. Sit at the table and look around at the disciples. They are present with Jesus who loves them beyond measure, in an intimate scene of food and friendship – yet the light of that warmth highlights the flickering ambiguity of their love. Shadows gather.

I wonder what the mood was around that table. I wonder what you see as you soak in the scene. Do we see our own ambiguity reflected in the disciples at that last meal?

Judas' smile, as he reaches for some bread, belies the growing darkness in his heart. Dear Judas, conned by the father of lies. What well-worn pathways in his internal narrative have been manipulated, worked on, fired up to make him conceive of such a monstrous betrayal? What insecurities have been inflamed by poisonous insinuations deep in his heart? Is it fear of the regime? The desire to make things happen? A need to be in control? Whatever the cause – bitterness has taken root, tended by the deceiver, flowering into betrayal.

All this is known to Jesus, who stoops to wash the feet that will shortly kick him in the teeth. Is his handling of Judas's feet any less attentive, any less gentle as he towels them dry? I don't think so. I think he washed Judas' feet carefully, in deep sadness, for 'he loved them all to the end' – even the one whose thoughts were not clean.

Then Peter – dear irrepressible Peter – the labrador of the Gospels. All-in, wanting to please, to be loyal, irrepressible, and keen. 'Wash my hands and head too!' Brave Peter who will stay as close as he can, even after Jesus's arrest. Peter - who will follow and wait and watch. What courage that took – to put himself within the grasp of danger. We often forget that, remembering only his denial. But it took such courage to put himself there in the first place. In that fearful arena he will lose his nerve. Words of denial will spew out - perhaps

unsurprising, given the danger. Poor Peter – will come face to face with his failure to be all he desires to be. Bitter failure. Ambiguous discipleship.

And the rest, when faced by the looming darkness of that night they run away on their freshly washed feet, even as their bodies are digesting the food he has blessed. Ambiguity.

The ambiguity of discipleship affects all of us. Ambiguity – enigma, evasion, vagueness, doublespeak. In responding to the invitation to move deeper into love can we square up to the ambiguity of our discipleship honestly?

There is no ambiguity in our Lord's actions and words. Knowing his purpose. Knowing his God, he stoops to serve. Humility writ large. He tenderly washes the feet of his ambiguous disciples. In full knowledge that they will betray, deny and flee. Knowing his identity. Knowing his God. Jesus calls his disciples to follow his example, to know our purpose, to trust our God to inhabit our true identity: to love as he loves. Nothing ambiguous here.

And yet – their discipleship and ours is riddled with ambiguity. We seek to stand in faith – yet often flee in fear. We reach for hope - yet easily crumble in despair. We desire to love – yet often our best intentions are rugby tackled by selfishness, the myth of scarcity, and fear.

Discipleship doesn't exist in a vacuum. We must attend to another ambiguity. That of context.

We like them, live in ambiguous times. The world order shakes. The strongmen strut upon the world stage, desiring resources, doing deals, communicating in baffling doublespeak, posturing and posing, as the little ones are crushed. There is war and rumour of war – and the future seems so uncertain.

So, we might be tempted to mute our discipleship, to flee into the shadows. Blend into the background.

And yet – as it has always been – the source of all hope, life, peace and love meets us this night, beckoning us deeper into love - knowing exactly who we are – all our glorious strengths, all our monumental flaws and fragilities, knowing...and loving. Nothing ambiguous here.

We must not fear the mountainous waves of our age – for the Still of all Storms is here. He calls us deeper into love. “Come and serve with me. Come and love with me. Come and trust me. I am your helper. Do not be afraid.”

We can bring to the one who washes our feet – the truth of the paths we have walked. We can bring to the one who knows us the well-worn pathways of our internal narratives.

We can bring to the light our hidden stories, that can lead us into the darkness of ambiguity. God is the keeper of our stories. All is known anyway.

Just as you knew Judas' heart, you know ours. Protect us Lord. Just as you knew Peter's heart, you know each one of us. Strengthen us Lord.

God – transform the poverty of our ambiguous discipleship by the riches of your grace. Protect us from evil. Banish ambiguity. Shape our faithfulness. That we may earth your love and light in the contexts where we live and work.

In your name. In your love. For all people. Now and always. In the name of Jesus.

Amen

The Reverend Dr Kate Bruce
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