

Good Friday 2017 - Homily for St John's Passion
St Mary's Maldon

In St John's gospel reference is made to two bowls of water and two charcoal fires. Through them we start to discover how to respond to the passion of Christ that we are hearing sung so beautifully tonight.

First, there is the bowl of water that Jesus uses to wash his disciples' feet. In this act of service he not only turns upside down their notions of leadership and power, he gives them what is called 'the new commandment', that they love one another, for it will be by this love that the world will know that they are his disciples. Quite simply, and on his knees with a bowl of water and a towel, Jesus offers the whole world a vision of what humanity can be when we truly love each other. As we look out upon the horrors and confusions of our world, it should bring us to our knees too: first in prayers, and then in service.

But then there is that other bowl of water; the one Pilate uses to wash his hands of Jesus. And we know about this vision of humanity as well: we know how easy and tempting it is to avoid responsibility, pass the buck, serve our own interests first and leave others to pick up the tab.

And then, when Jesus has been arrested, there is the first charcoal fire, the one where Peter warms himself and is asked three times whether he knows Jesus. And three times he swears he's never even met him. This is also something we know, looking for an easy way out, turning our back on difficult situations, saving our own skin first.

But it is around a second charcoal fire, after his resurrection from the dead, that the risen Christ eats breakfast with his disciples and asks Peter three times – one for each denial – if he loves him. Painfully Peter replies: you know everything - you know my sins and my failures, my confusions and my passion - and you know that I love you. Jesus then repeats the first words he ever spoke to Peter: "Follow me."

These bowls of water and charcoal fires speak to us today. Seeing and hearing the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, and learning of his love for us, we see what humanity could be when we live like Christ, turning the other cheek, walking the second mile, loving our neighbour as ourself. Will we stand before him, and like the great chorus that opens the St John Passion call him Lord and Master? Will we, like him, serve others or serve ourselves? Pretend we don't know him, or follow in his way?

+Stephen
Bishop of Chelmsford