

Hinde Street Methodist Church

April 2nd 2015 7pm - Maundy Thursday

Val Reid

Exodus 12: 1-14

1 Corinthians 11.23-26

John 13.1-17, 31b-35

This week, at an auction at Christie's, Tracey Emin's bed was sold for 2 ½ million pounds. It was bought by a German businessman and art collector, who will lend it to Tate Britain for ten years.

This simple – though extravagant – transaction merited a whole page in my daily newspaper on Tuesday.

Why?

When Tracey Emin's bed was first shown at Tate Britain in 1999, it polarised opinion.

But the media frenzy pushed visitor numbers to a record high.

For some it was a travesty.

For others it was art at its most personal and poignant.

The bed was a real bed – Tracey Emin's actual bed from her council flat in Waterloo.

It was revealed in all its embarrassing glory – crumpled and stained sheets, dirty underwear, empty bottles of alcohol, used condoms.

She had stayed in this bed for days after the break-down of a relationship.

Whether you love it or hate it, why was it – is it – such a powerful work of art?

Because it invites us into the messy reality of life.

It is not tidied up.

It is not prettified.

It invites us to participate.

To put ourselves, imaginatively, in this chaotic and unhappy place.

We have all taken refuge in bed at moments of deep unhappiness.

This is our story.

Our three lectionary readings for Maundy Thursday invite us to participate.

They are about actions which have become liturgical rituals.

They are ways of putting ourselves in God's story.

From the book of Exodus we have the story of the first Passover.

This year, the Jewish Festival of Passover coincides with the Christian festival of Easter.

The first day of Passover begins at sundown on Good Friday.

In the Exodus narrative, the story of the first Passover does two things.

The people of Israel need to be given a code, a sign, to protect themselves from the last and most dreadful plague.

The death of the first born.

But this sign is not just a piece of paper.
Not just words.
It is embodied in a meal.
Taking and sacrificing a lamb.
Smearing the blood on the lintels of the house.
Eating it with your family.
Eating it with your shoes on, your bag packed, ready to go.
No leftovers.

And you will keep doing it.
It will become a day of remembrance.
And you will remember best by sitting together as a family, eating lamb and unleavened bread.
Liturgically re-enacting that first, desperate, hurried meal.
That way, the liberating power of God will be written in the body.
God's story will become your story.

In the same way, as Jesus shares a Passover supper with his disciples, he institutes another action which embodies something profoundly important about his relationship with them.
He washes their feet.

In the language he uses to tell the story, John points up the rich metaphors in this act.
Jesus takes off and puts down his outer robe.

Tithemi in Greek.

The same word Jesus uses when he calls himself the Good Shepherd who lays down – *tithemi* – his life for his sheep.

Then Jesus wipes the disciples' feet with a towel.

Ekmassein.

The same word used when Mary wipes Jesus' feet with her hair.

John, the gospel writer, likes to use words.

Jesus likes to use embodied actions.

Do this, he says.

Wash one another's feet.

You need to know what it feels like.

You need to know what it feels like to have your feet washed by another.

To surrender yourself to that embarrassing intimacy.

To let someone come that close.

Peter was reluctant to let Jesus do this for him – to him.

Until Jesus explained it.

It's about sharing.

It's about relationship.

Then Peter – characteristically over-enthusiastic – says OK.

Wash all of me then.

My whole body!

But you also need to know what it feels like to wash someone else's feet.
To commit yourself to another person in this deeply human, way.
We can talk all we like about servanthood.
But when we actually do it, when we put it into practice, when we have someone else's
sweaty feet, their toes, their bunions, in our hands – that makes it real.

I understand that many of us don't want to have our feet washed, or to let someone else
touch our feet.

I understand that some of us agree to do this, but wash our feet first so they are not too
unpleasant.

Somehow I feel we are missing the point.

I've been reading a book by Iain McGilchrist called 'The master and his emissary – the
divided brain and the making of the western world.'

McGilchrist is a Consultant Psychiatrist, and Clinical Director of the Bethlem Royal and
Maudsley Hospital London.

He is also a former lecturer in English Literature at Oxford University.

He knows about the science of the brain.

And he knows about the power of the imagination.

He argues that the brain is divided.

The left hemisphere, which governs our right hands, is about knowing things.

Understanding and analysing things.

Putting things in their conceptual place so we can categorise them and use them and control
them.

Most of us are right-handed.

The right hemisphere, which governs our left hands, is about connection.

It's about seeing things in the round.

It's about understanding the complicated and nuanced context of things.

It's about being in touch with our senses, our imagination.

It's about feeling our place in the world with our whole bodies.

Iain McGilchrist argues that we live in a left brain culture.

Classifying and labelling things makes us feel safe.

We like knowing **about** things.

Knowing things – in all their rich and complex and disconcerting intimacy – is more of a
challenge.

You'll see that the artwork I produced for Holy Week is about getting in touch with right
brain stuff.

Nearly fifteen years ago I wrote my first icon – Mary Eleousa.

I am right-handed, so naturally I used my right hand to copy the image, which is what you do
in iconography.

I used my right hand to mix the pigments, and paint neatly within the lines.

A couple of weeks ago I tried painting Mary Eleousa with my left hand.

What a mess.

But what insight into the chaotic reality of the complex, deeply loving, deeply painful relationship between a mother and her son!

McGilchrist argues that our brains are designed for the right brain to be dominant.

The sensing, feeling, embodied world of the right brain should be our default mode of existence.

The left brain is designed to do its analytical work in service to the right brain, which **knows** – at a really deep level – what is truth.

But the arrogant left brain has taken over.

Has claimed that its way of seeing the world is the only way.

If you can't explain it, argue about it, prove it, then it isn't real.

It's the Richard Dawkins approach to faith.

Jesus invites us to tell our left brains to shut up for a moment.

Allow the story to inhabit your body.

Allow your body to tell the story.

Participate in incarnational faith.

Just do it.

Eat the lamb.

Let your feet be washed.

Wash someone else's feet.

Eat the bread

Drink the wine.

*If you know these things, you are blessed if you **do** them.*

Amen.