

meeting Jesus

a sermon preached on

holy thursday

29 March 2018

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by father richard wilson

the lections: Exodus 12:1-4 (5-10) 11-14; Ps 116: 1-2, 11- 18; 1 Corinthians 11: 23-26; John 13: 1-17, 31b – 35

This evening's readings include the texts of institution of three great religious practices—the Passover of the Jews, the Eucharist and the Washing of Feet. For many Christians, including this community, the Eucharist has become the central rite, a sacrament, repeated often, weekly or even daily, the source and object of our faith. The Eucharist is shared by all the people, but, by tradition, presided over only by a small group of people who may lead it.

In this scheme of traditional ritual, foot washing only takes place today, Maundy Thursday. But, given the prominence John accords it, it might have been given the same sacramental status as the Eucharist. Is it any less symbolic in our faith?

As some of you know, in 2015, I spent five weeks in Italy walking the last thirty six stages of the Via Francigena—the pilgrimage from Canterbury to Rome. I commenced my pilgrimage in Pavia, just south of Milan. One of the features, indeed the lesson, of this kind of pilgrimage is how you depend on other people—for food, accommodation, directions, many things which we take for granted.

My practice, as I went along, was to book my accommodation a couple of days ahead, ringing the ostello – the hostel – and hoping that my limited Italian would make sense to the ostello keeper. About halfway through, I called the ostello at Monteriggioni—the stage between the two great Sienese cities of San Gimignano and Siena—to make a booking.

To my discomfort—because I hate having my plans messed with—the man on the phone said no, no, no, don't stay in Monteriggioni, but in Abbazia Isola, a few kilometres short of Monteriggioni—*e tante bene signore, molto bello*. (It is very good, very beautiful.) Reluctantly I accepted. He said he would make the booking. I was not so sure.

Several days later, leaving the grandeur of San Gimignano I walked the 25kms or so to Abbazia Isola. My worst fears were realised. It had a bar (coffee shop), a petrol station and a church with some out-buildings. Not even a village, surrounded by beautiful farmland, but no ostello was obvious. Eventually, looking around the tiny square on which the church stood, I found a doorway with a bell.

I rang it, clomp, clomp, clomp on some stairs and the door was opened by a woman whom I later found was named Lydia. *Benvenuto pellegrino*, she cried with her arms opened wide, *entri!* Welcome pilgrim, come in.

Lydia and Ettore, her husband, belong to a lay order of the church devoted to hospitality for pilgrims. They live in Bologna, some distance from Abbazia Isola. They were 'on duty' for two weeks,

living in a flat in this small comfortable, but isolated, ostello that held about a dozen people. I was the only guest that evening.

After I had washed and changed and eased my aches and pains, they served coffee and a cold drink and some food. Then I took a look around the town – it didn't take long – and had a rest.

Before dinner we met in a sort of common area between the dormitory and their flat for what would be Evening Prayer. Lydia and Ettore appeared wearing natty short velvet capes with pilgrimage symbols sewn on them, and we said our prayers. But then Ettore produced a bowl and some water, removed my sandals and proceeded to wash, and kiss, my feet.

We then repaired to the dining table of the flat for an evening meal cooked by Lydia. Over two hours or so, in broken Italian and English we talked about all the usual things – where we lived, family, where we lived, our work. We became, for a little while, best of friends.

In the morning after breakfast we said our farewells, I blessed them and left, walking down the stairs with Lydia stuffing fruit and bread rolls into my rucksack.

I walked the Via Francigena hoping to meet Jesus. And I did, at Abbadia Isola.

In the gospel Jesus says to the disciples 'So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.'

We are called to a sacrament of care for one another, figured in Jesus' washing of his disciples' feet, figured in Ettore's washing of my feet. But the sacrament is realised in the sacrificial care Ettore and Lydia provided to me, of food and lodging, of friendship, and also in the intervention of the ostello keeper in Monteriggioni who knew, better than I did what I needed that night.

We will shortly observe our annual ritual of foot-washing, and in doing so we are reminded that this is a sacrament we are all called to preside over every day. To render each day in simple everyday acts of compassion, to care for one another.

Jesus said: 'If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them'.