

Earlier this week, we witnessed the final debate between President Donald Trump and former Vice President Joe Biden before the United States goes to the polls to elect a President for the next four years. It has not been a particularly edifying campaign – our own political campaigns look remarkably sedate in comparison. At this stage in the campaign, people are on the lookout for something said in haste, some action that is inappropriate that will knock the candidate off balance, put him on the back foot, discredit him in front of the electorate,

Over the last few weeks in our readings from Matthew’s Gospel, we are seeing something along the same lines. It is the lead up to Passover. Jesus is now in Jerusalem, having received a rapturous reception from the crowds. In the eyes of the authorities, this Galilean preacher is not going to go away. He is gaining support and he will have to be dealt with. We find Jesus in the Temple precincts, the Jewish authorities questioning him, trying to tie him down, trying to discredit him in front of the crowds. The Sadducees have tried and given up. Now another group, the Pharisees, step forward. They ask a question that appears in a number of settings in the Gospels. It is about the Law, what is the most important requirement of the Law and it elicits a response that is familiar to us all:

<sup>36</sup>‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’ <sup>37</sup>He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’” <sup>38</sup>This is the greatest and first commandment. <sup>39</sup>And a second is like it: “‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’” <sup>40</sup>On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’ *Matt 22:36-40*

As I read that, my mind turns to the Shorter Catechism of the Presbyterian Church. ‘What is man’s chief end?’ ‘Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him for ever.’ How am I to glorify God? I go back to the words of Jesus:

<sup>40</sup>‘On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’

Love of God is the greatest commandment – but love of neighbour is inseparable from it. In the course of Matthew’s account of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches:

‘Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.  
*Matthew 7:21*

This brings to mind words of the Prophet Micah that are reflected in words used for our confession in this service:

Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,  
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?  
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”  
He has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
and what does the Lord require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God? *Micah 6:7,8*

Within a few short days of the encounter related here, Jesus is with his disciples in the Upper Room sharing the Last Supper. We remember, in the bread and wine of the Jewish Passover meal, Jesus speaks of his coming death. We remember that every time we celebrate the Holy Communion. The writer of the 4<sup>th</sup> Gospel tells us of another action that night, as Jesus fulfilling the role of a household servant, washes the feet of his disciples, inviting them to similar service to each other. We celebrate with bread and wine to this day, but the washing of the feet has never really caught on.

There is something very profound in this action. Jesus, totally committed to the Father’s will in loving obedience, shows his love to his disciples in an act of loving, self-giving service, that foreshadows the Cross.

The writer of the 4<sup>th</sup> Gospel, introduces the account of the foot washing with these words:

Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

*John 13:1*

Jesus embodies in his life and in his death the core of the commandments expressed in our Gospel reading

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.”<sup>38</sup>This is the greatest and first commandment. <sup>39</sup>And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

Love of God and love of neighbour. I recall talking to a lovely Christian gentleman with a deep personal faith. He confessed that he came to a point in his life when he realised that he loved the Lord, but he had not always loved people. Which of us cannot identify with those very honest sentiments? Christ comes to us where we are, in all our strengths and weaknesses, in all our humanity and leads us further on.

I find the image of Jesus washing my feet incredibly powerful. I imagine my awkwardness, I imagine the gentleness of the hands, the gentleness of the look, the gentleness with which he says, ‘I’ve washed your feet, now go and wash your neighbour’s.’ We won’t always get it right, but Jesus remains there, reminding me, encouraging me, strengthening me.

I’ll just close with the final verse of the hymn we sang at the start of this service:

- 4 Loving puts us on our knees,  
serving as though we were slaves,  
this is the way we should live with you.

*Jesu, Jesu,  
fill us with you love,  
show us how to serve  
the neighbours we have from you.*