

“The impossible instruction” John 13:1-17, 31-35

Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, do you wash my feet?” Jesus answered him, “What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand.” Peter said to him, “You shall never wash my feet.” Jesus answered him, “If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.” Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!” Jesus said to him, “The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not every one of you.” For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, “Not all of you are clean.” When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, “Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. (John 13:1-17)

Jesus said, “Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once. Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, ‘Where I am going you cannot come.’ A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

How do you think about the Church? How do you think about Christianity and Christians? What comes to your mind when you hear these questions? Surely, each one will have their own images, impressions, emotions, and memories coming up.

Some good, some not so good. Perhaps, you may remember someone, who was crucial in bringing you into God's family, proclaiming to you the Gospel that

changed your heart and life. We may think about the importance of the Church community in our lives, or about how blessed we have been through the Church, through weekly worship and studies of the Word, through fellow saints in Christ.

Or, perhaps, we may remember how we were hurt by someone gossiping, or being rude to us. We may remember conflicts, which we may have witnessed, the lack of grace and forgiveness among us, and instead – expressions of selfishness.

Or maybe we wonder about the preferences of our Father in heaven, as He seems to bring together rather strange a bunch of people. Probably you could add many other thoughts and images. That certainly is the human side of the Church.

But we as Christians we also think about the Church the way our Triune God Himself thinks about us. The Church as God's people, yes, God's own people. That's you. Chosen from before the foundation of the world. Called into God's own family, redeemed not with gold or silver, but with the precious blood of Jesus Christ.

Forgiven, loved as God's true children, far beyond our comprehension, united with Him and with one another with the bond of the Holy Spirit, with the most intimate, the most enduring tie that there is, embraced and welcomed by the Holy Trinity.

Universal, eternal, time and place transcending community of God's people who are destined to live with God the Creator and Redeemer forever in His New Heavens and New Earth. The Spirit created community, the most amazing community. You...

Yes, also unworthy and ungrateful, but still daily showered with God's grace. That's us. This is how we should see ourselves. This is how we should think about the Church. Let's pray that the Holy Spirit enables us to rejoice in this uplifting reality.

But how does the world see the Church? How does the world think about Christianity and Christians? What pictures, what images do they have? Imagery of the luxurious St Peter's Basilica in Vatican? Imagery of incredible wealth and splendour? Or countless sexual abuse scandals that now for years have been shaping public's views on Christianity?

Or perhaps in current cultural situation the world sees Christians as the "against people". Those who are against sexual pleasures and adventures, those who are against the choice of relationships that suits any particular individual, those who are against individual freedom and autonomy to be and to do whatever we want.

Those killjoys, those "always against people"! Or, perhaps, the world still sees us as of some value, to teach some morals and to do some good in this world, even if the whole Christian thing seems to them obsolete and not relevant at all.

Now, let's look closer to the home – how do those people whom God has placed in your life, how do they think about Christians and about the Church? Do they know

that you are a Christian? What impression about what this Church of Christ is about have they gotten from you? What do you think? It is a good question to reflect on.

Jesus actually gives us very clear guidelines for how we are to represent Him. Just listen once more to His own words! This is the instruction that Jesus Himself gave us on the last evening that He spent with His disciples:

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

See, that simple – by this people will know that we are Jesus’ disciples, if we will love one another as Jesus has loved us. This is how the world hopefully should see us, how everyone should see us; as this extraordinary loving bunch.

Imagine, if this is how the world, how everyone would see the Church, if this is how they would think about Christians: “O, yes, those people, they truly love one another just as Jesus Christ has loved them. Incredible, amazing people!”

What a wonderful testimony would that be! But what exactly does this mean – to love one another as Jesus has loved us? The event that we remember tonight, the washing of the feet helps us to get a glimpse of what it really means.

“When Jesus knew that His hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.”

It is very difficult for us to step in that situation. We haven’t been in such situation, and may the Lord spare us that we never are.

But just imagine, that that was your last evening. Last hours of freedom. Last hours before the most horrible pain is inflicted to you. Where first you are violently arrested, beaten, accused, mocked, and then – death penalty.

Not any, but the most painful, the most shameful that there was – hanging naked on the cross, convulsing in agony, trying to grasp for the breath of air, while being laughed at and ridiculed by soulless mob. Imagine, you knew that that was coming. How would you choose to spend your last hours?

We know what Jesus did. He loved His own to the end. Serving them, washing their feet. It doesn’t make much sense to us, the distance in culture and time is too big. But the washing of the feet was the task that only slaves were expected to do.

There is not a single testimony where someone with a higher status would wash the feet of someone of lower status, like a teacher to his students. That was unimaginable. We can’t understand, and even the disciples, whatever shocked they felt at that moment, they couldn’t understand the magnitude of what Jesus did.

Love as self-denying service to our neighbours. **“If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you.”**

If you were there on that evening, Jesus Christ, the Eternal Son would have washed your feet. He would have served you. Who is He and who are we?! The lesson that Jesus taught us with the washing of the feet stands together with other lessons: **“Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.”** (John 15:13) Again, this is true – Jesus did lay down His life for you.

Or listen how the Holy Spirit speaks through Paul describing Jesus’ love and commitment to us: **“Jesus emptied Himself [for you!], by taking the form of a servant [think about this – God the eternal Creator becoming a creature] ... And then He humbled Himself [for your sake!] by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”** (Phil 2:7-8) Yes, Jesus did it for you!

That is how He loves us. Now His instructions for us, plain and simple: “Love one another as I have loved you, and then, when you do that, the world will know that you are my disciples.” Plain and simple, yes, of course, but also – totally impossible.

How can we do that? We don’t have such love, such strength, such commitment in us. No one does. Even summoning all our will power, all the best that we have in us we couldn’t produce even a single drop of such love, not to dream that we could love one another as Jesus has loved us. Where does it leave us?

If we can’t love one another as Jesus has loved us, then people will not know that we are His disciples, they will not know about Jesus, and they will not be attracted to this Jesus from Nazareth whom we worship as our Lord. That’s it...

So, the urgent question for us is – how could Jesus love us so self-sacrificially? Where did He draw such power, such commitment? We have the answer in our Gospel reading: **“When Jesus knew that His hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father... knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going back to God... He loved His own to the end.”**

See, this is how Jesus could love us with such extra-ordinary love and commitment. Because He was loved by His Father. He knew who He was – beloved Son of His loving Father, He knew that the Father had given Him everything. That wonderful assurance enabled Him to humble Himself, and even to lay down His life for us.

This is where we should turn, if we are to take Jesus’ command “love one another” seriously. On our own we are like empty hoses; if we hope to produce such divine love, we first need to be connected to the source, to the very spring of divine love.

And, yes! you are. Now you have the same Father as Jesus had. In your Baptism you have been adopted and welcomed into God's own family. Now you too can be assured that you have come from Him and that at the end you are going to Him.

Besides, the Holy Spirit who has made home with you and indwells in you, He testifies about something else amazing – now you are children of God, and if children then also heirs and co-heirs with Jesus Christ. It means that whatever the Father has given to Him, you will share in that abundance.

The same love that Jesus received from His Father, the same love is now poured over you. It is difficult to believe, I know, it sounds too great, too wonderful to be true. We struggle to feel it, to trust it, to experience it fully. Our Father and our brother Jesus know that, they know how difficult it is for us.

This is why they rush to help us. This is why our God gathers us every week, He sets time aside to be among us and to speak to us. That's Him who every week speaks to us His love, who reassures us of all our sins forgiven.

And most amazingly, He Himself comes to feed us, to strengthen and sustain us on this journey. Not with some ordinary meal, no! He, the Lord of Life, feeds us forgiveness, salvation and eternal life in His Holy Meal.

He, the very source of divine love, indwells in us and as that happens, "out of your heart begins to flow rivers of living water." (John 7:38) Then we can't but produce this love, it flows through us, unstoppable, and into the lives of people around us.

This is not of our doing; this is what our loving God and our Lord Jesus does for us and through us. I pray this evening, that our Triune God would fill you with His love so abundantly that people could look at us, at our relationships and exclaim in amazement:

"Those people, those Christians, they truly love one another! I wish that I too could be one of them!"

Amen.