Well- what are we doing here? What has drawn you to be here in the cathedral this evening – why do you want to think about the events of this holy week? I think it’s partly because as we engage with the story of the suffering of God we may begin to find a place for our own pain. Few, if any of us go through our lives without taking some knocks. We all sit here guarding our wounds and the pain from years back. We sit here too with the knowledge of our world’s history – tragedy after tragedy after tragedy. Where can we take such atrocity, so much meaningless violence, so much fear? A baby held in the arms of a perfect mother, our Christmas celebrations, can’t quite hold it. But an adult Christ, reeling from the pain inflicted on him in so many ways through these days of holy week – a wounded Christ, a God who feels, a God who laughs, a God who hurts, a God who enters the deepest darknesses of humanity – here we find one who can hold the life, the pain we feel and see. And here we find one who offers a model: a way of life, who demonstrates the way of the cross: what does it mean to take up your cross and follow Christ? It starts here, in the simple act of service that Jesus does: it starts with love. Love stripped bare, exposed for what it really is: something constant, selfless, transforming. Something not afraid to go to the smelliest places and be itself. How does love respond to your smelly feet? Love holds them, soothes them, pours cleansing water over them, treats them like the most precious jewels.

Our readings tonight bring together two different chapters of God’s reaching out to the human race. The first goes back to the children of Israel and their salvation from slavery. Pharoah will not let them go, despite every plague that Moses can call down upon Egypt. Then comes the preparation for the final disaster. The first born sons of Egypt are going to be killed. But the angels of death need a sign so that they can avoid the children of Israel. So they are to kill lambs, drain them of blood, roast and eat the flesh, and paint the blood on the lintels of their doors, as a sign that they are God’s people. Pretty gruesome really. The way the story is told in Exodus, God wants something pretty dramatic so that people will remember him, remember that he loves them and wants them to live in his light and in relationship with him. And the story contains within it a command to remember this act with a meal every year. The children of Israel must remember how they were saved, saved from the slaughter of their boys and young men, saved from slave labour and oppression at the hands of the Egyptians. The angel of death passed over them, and so the festival is called Passover.

That’s the first chapter we recall in what we are doing here tonight. The second moves on a few thousand years to an upper room where Jesus is celebrating that Passover meal with his disciples. In John’s gospel it’s not a Passover meal as such – it’s a preparation meal. For John, the crucifixion is the Passover: his message is clear: Jesus is the Passover lamb sacrificed so that his people can be saved. And John doesn’t give the account of the meal and the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the wine, and the command of Jesus to remember him. We have to go to Paul for that, handing down the tradition he has received.

In Jesus, we see God reaching out to his people. Doing something dramatic, again, that will make people remember him – remember that he loves them and wants them to live and know his love for them. He gives the meal as an aide memoire: remember me. This bread is my body. This wine is my blood. Remember. God is as close to you as the bread you eat and the wine you drink. He’s broken for you on the
cross, just as the bread is broken in his hands. He pours himself out for you like the wine is poured into the cup. Eat, drink, he says: take me in to yourself.

John doesn’t tell us that. But what he does do is to give a unique story, where we see the Lord of heaven stoop down like a servant and wash feet. An extraordinary thing to do, to wash the feet of your friends. We don’t do that – though we pay someone we don’t know to do so. The friendship aspect makes it different though. Look at how hard it has been to find volunteers for having their feet washed symbolically this evening. I have found that disturbing, it’s like none of us really wants to go that distance, make ourselves that vulnerable. A psychologist at work was telling me his week that when you rub people’s feet in a particular way they tell you their life story – is that what we are scared of? When I was a nurse I used to wash people’s feet sometimes. It was my job. If they were particularly gruesome feet, I could wear latex gloves so that I didn’t actually have to come into contact with the foot itself.

Jesus didn’t wear latex gloves. There is nothing separating about his actions, either here or on the cross. This is about relationship, intimacy, honesty. All things that many of us find difficult. It’s what Jesus gives us: and it’s what we are called to give him. And in taking our shoes and socks off, we make a tiny outward sign of an inward honesty – a willingness to be real. Increasingly, I hate my feet; they are covered in corns and callouses and I discover I am taking after my grandmother who had the most impressive bunions. I like to keep them covered. But for those of us who do allow their feet to be washed tonight, of us I know it will be an experience of grace, of love, of relationship, that is based in reality. This is who I am: these are my feet.

Yesterday, we reflected on the passage in John 4, where Jesus meets the woman from samaria and asks her for water from the well. In my imaginations I was the woman, but my bucket was so full of other things that I was carrying that there was little space for the water. I kept trying to hide the bucket from Jesus who kept saying, why don’t you drop the bucket and draw the water? In the end, I showed him the contents of the bucket, and together we emptied it, mostly, and then filled it with the precious water. Then Jesus held the bucket and poured the water all over my feet, and I was shocked at the waste, and transfixed by the love.

Jesus does that for his disciples. It reflected the time earlier when Mary had poured perfume over his feet, extravagantly giving of herself. Jesus pours himself out: pours wine like his blood, pours water over his friends feet and wipes them dry with his towel. It’s shockingly wasteful, totally loving. Could they receive such love? Peter objected, and you can understand it. This is too much, to hard to take. But Jesus says, you must let me do this. You must let me love you, you must let me see you– otherwise you can have no part in me. And having done this: he said to them: see what I have done for you? Now you must do the same for each other.

This is the Jesus we see tonight. Jesus who is willing to go to the cross, his body broken like the bread he commands us to eat, his blood spilled like the wine he commands us to drink. Can you drink from the cup that I will drink from? Jesus asks his disciples in Matthew’s Gospel and Mark’s. Now he commands us to drink from that cup.

This is the Jesus that we see tonight: Jesus who kneels before us to wash the feet of the disciples and make them clean. Do this in remembrance of me. This is what it means to walk in God’s way, to humble yourself to serve others.

This is the Jesus that we see tonight: the lamb that will be sacrificed tomorrow. His blood will be shed for our salvation.
This is Jesus. And in him we see our God, God who reaches out to us from the beginning of time, calling us into a relationship with him, calling us to follow in the way of Christ, calling us to remember Him, calling us to be like him, calling us to serve. We are part of the story, and the story goes on with us in it.

This is Jesus. Do this in remembrance of him.