*Love to the loveless shown, that they might lovely be.*

These words by the 17th century Samuel Crossman should resonate loudly with us as we celebrate the events of the Lord’s death and resurrection in the nave of Chichester cathedral, where we dare to assert the reality of God’s love. And though this assertion might be disturbing for those who live without any faith in God, even the unbelieving 20th century poet, Philip Larkin, found himself compelled to consider the transformative power of love, as he reflected on the Arundel tomb, just a few feet away from us. The most that Larkin could say was that the long-dead figures, their embrace captured in stone, might prove “our almost-instinct, almost true/What will survive of us is love.”

Tonight we celebrate the event in which Jesus bequeaths the ultimate and enduring emblem of love: his body and blood, given to us in the sacrifice of the Eucharistic, in order that as we participate in this banquet, we might lovely be.

I also suspect that tonight some of you will be relieved that no one has asked you, in your loveliness, to come forward and present your naked foot for washing in the ancient rite that normally attends this Eucharist of the Lord’s Supper.

Generally, we are reticent about going bare-foot, and certainly about the idea that someone else would wash even one of our feet in public. The spirit of St Peter certainly lives in the English heart: “You will never wash my feet!”

And for all our western sophistication, we are theologically rather provincial, far removed in time, distance and culture from where the events of the Passion took place. The near-Eastern culture of ritual washing has survived in Jewish and Islamic rituals and are commonplace in many parts of Britain today.

We know from Luke’s account of Jesus eating in the house of Simon the Pharisee, that the offering of water for the washing of feet was a standard expression of welcome to any guest. Simon insulted Jesus by failing to offer that customary hospitality.

We also know from the gospels of Mark and Matthew that just before Jesus celebrates the Passover festival he has supper in Bethany, on the edge of Jerusalem, and a woman comes in and anoints him with very expensive ointment. Jesus tells the disciples, “By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial. Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.” (Matthew 26:12).

This is a lovely thing, done to the body of Jesus, in order that it might lovely be as the sign of our triumph over sin and death, and the recovery of our hope to live in freedom as the children of God.

In this Eucharist Jesus says to us, definitively, “This is my body,” referring both to the unleavened bread that he blesses and shares, and the physical body that is his incarnate presence with them. Tomorrow it will be disfigured by torture and cruelty as it is slowly put to death on the cross. And then it will be taken down, a corpse.

The gospel writers tell us that his body is placed in a shroud and buried, which is where the practice and expectations of Semitic culture become so important.

In many parts of the world it would be unthinkable to send for the commercial funeral director to take the body of someone you love. No. In death, the body belongs with the family and intimate friends who will care for it as an act of love, so that in death the body retains its dignity. “Love to the loveless (and lifeless) shown, that they might lovely be.”

In both Jewish and Islamic traditions, there is a ritual for washing the body. It is a beautiful act of love and tenderness. It is not the same as embalming, but as one Shi’ite commentator puts it, the body is washed and perfumed so that it is ready for the day of judgement.

First the chest is pressed as a sign of ensuring that the breath of life has fully departed. Then head and face are cleansed, then the hands then the feet. Then it is washed with soap and scent: it is dried, the nostrils are stopped up, the body and the head are covered and finally the body is enveloped in its white linen shroud.

These elements of breath, washing, use of perfume, and clothing in clean linen are also the elements of Christian baptism in its very earliest form.

In the fourth century St Ambrose, tells us that at Milan the rite of baptism included the *Ephphatha*, the touching of ears and nose, so as to hear the word of God and to inhale the “sweet savour of eternal godliness”, and in addition to the three-fold dipping in water in the name of the Trinity, the bishop washed the feet of the newly baptised. It was a practice that did not survive, but what did it mean?

Ambrose reminds his congregation that washing the feet of guests is simply an common act which is a sign of humility. Everyone does it: it’s still widely understood in the culture of his day. But the washing of feet in church is something different: this is a sign of sanctification. It is the sign that baptism truly is our sharing in Christ’s death.

The Church washes and anoints us with the scented oil of Chrism. It clothes us (in the earliest rites of baptism) with white linen and we are then admitted into the company of those who experience on earth a foretaste of the eternal banquet in heaven – the Eucharist.

So when Jesus washes the feet of his disciples he is indeed preparing them for death, just as he will also become for them with the sacrifice that releases them from death.

Jesus looks around the festive meal table and sees friends with whom he has travelled the length and breadth of Galilee. They have witnessed the chilling death of John Baptist, met with sinister trickery from the authorities, and confronted demons, their own and other people’s. And they have found refreshment, faith and hope in the response of utter joy from marginal and broken people, the ones who enter the kingdom of heaven first.

He looks around the table at his friends and he loves them. But can they carry the cross, as he warned them they must? Can they drink the cup of suffering and obedience to its very dregs? James and John, of course, are eager - Peter more so than both of them. But he knows them and their limitations.

He takes the towel and gets down from the table, startling them by this interruption to the evening’s ritual. Washing was done before the meal in the normal way. This is something different. “Do you know what I have done to you?”, he says. This washing constitutes the foundation of a new relationship. Death and liberation from death are at its heart.

The relationship is as close and intimate as being the family who will wash the body of those you love when death befalls them. (“You also ought to wash one another’s feet,” Jesus instructed them). Loving them unconditionally, knowing that they will fail him, Jesus washes their bodies now – love to the loveless shown, that they might lovely be – because he knows that they must, and will, in turn, love others into the loveliness of the kingdom of heaven through the baptismal life that has cast out fear, that lives in hope, and will stand confidently before the face of God when justice and mercy meet and we are judged.

In the waters of the font, you were washed and sanctified, given a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Love to the loveless shown, that you might lovely be.