

Maundy Thursday, 2009

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“What makes this night different from all other nights?” From the earliest times, this is the question asked by the youngest member in a Jewish family at the start of the Passover meal.

There is so much that makes this night different from every other night, for the Jew and for the Christian. For the Jew, this was the night when the angel of death, averted by the blood of the Passover lambs, passed over the first born of the Hebrew people, leaving them untouched, but bringing death to the Egyptians; proclaiming God's power over all other gods, and ultimately leading the Jewish people to freedom.

As is very evident, this evening of Maundy Thursday brings with it so much to mark its difference and its significance for us as those who would follow Christ. The Last Supper, the Institution of Holy Communion, the Foot-washing, long talks by Jesus about his death and the coming of the Holy Spirit, Jesus' betrayal, his trial.

In John's Gospel, the starting point for all these events is the foot-washing; prefigured by Jesus' entry to Jerusalem – his proclamation of himself as a servant king, a king not interested in gold or power or being better than others. So don't let's pass over the significance of this foot-washing in the face of the other extraordinary events of this night and the days to come.

Let's think about feet. They can be quite fascinating – enormously individual, like faces; idiosyncratic and often quite peculiar; sensitive; often smelly. And essentially functional. Life becomes difficult for us when our feet don't want to – or can't - walk.

In so many ways, our feet are symbolic of journey, of our walk in life and our walk of faith. We “walk the talk”, we walk in Jesus' footsteps, we take steps of faith, we walk the road to the Cross with Christ. In the Bible we find many references to feet: “how lovely on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news”; in Old Testament times to “uncover someone's feet” was a reference to sexual activity. In the Gospel of John, only days before this Passover gathering we read about Mary anointing Jesus' feet with costly perfume, wiping his feet with her hair – a reminder to us of Jesus' eventual burial. Other Gospel passages also speak about Jesus telling his disciples to shake the dust from their feet and move on where they are not welcomed into a town.

The Gospel writer John has made much of a constant theme running throughout this gospel: **come and follow**; come and see; follow me. There's movement with consequent revelation, as a recurring invitation. To really be able to see Jesus, to know who he really is, implies action taking on our parts – following him, it calls for movement of our selves – being on our feet, ready to go, both physically and metaphorically.

Now at this Last Meal of Jesus with his disciples, this action of Jesus in washing his disciples' feet takes on multiple layers of significance.

By means of background: Foot washing as a convention in Jesus' day:

- The host would often offer to have guests' feet washed, by servant
- Prior to the meal, Jesus' actions buck the usual conventions in several ways, and with this, highlight the significance of what he's doing:
- He's the host, so it seems, of this meal, yet he's the one doing the actual washing – unheard of for the host to take on such a servant's role. And unheard of that a master, a rabbi, would so humble himself to his disciples.

- For the reader or hearer of this Gospel, this servant role is further sharpened when we read (v.3) *Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God* - so, Jesus is not just a host, but he's one with God himself.
- Jesus knew he would be betrayed by Judas, yet he has no hesitation in washing Judas' feet: he extends his hospitality and love and submission – his acceptance - even to the one who would betray him.

In this great act of reversal - of the teacher, the Son of God, serving the disciples – we see not just the example we should follow of humility and servanthood. We see Jesus asking his disciples to place themselves in his hands completely and that they discard their images of who he is and how one comes to God.

He asks them to enter into relationship with him on his terms, with this relationship to be defined by God's love. Our part is to serve others.

There's huge intimacy involved here: in our day and age, we so often keep our feet hidden, under shoes, socks, stockings. To expose them to another's handling and gaze is like bringing hidden parts of our selves to the light and placing them in someone else's care. This is very intimate, and requires some trust – someone will clearly see that misshapen toe, that damaged toe-nail, will smell my smelly feet, will touch something lovingly that's not used to such touch.

For the disciples – their feet are more exposed; but Jesus, at this entry point into these final hours, turns something functional into a gift, an act of grace and love. Jesus washes off the dust and signs of the journey his disciples have walked with him, and prepares them for the new journey ahead. Jesus submits himself to them and they to him. Even Judas, the betrayer. In the night ahead, the feet of these disciples would walk with Jesus into the darkness of Gethsemane, these feet would walk away from him in his hour of need, would stand still, immobilized, through his trial, and these feet would follow him – albeit hesitatingly, silently, and at a distance –on the path to the Cross.

What about for us?

The big question is: are we prepared to walk with Christ to the darkness of Gethsemane and the Cross?

But I want to leave you with two other questions ; two challenges as we consider the washing of feet as a turning point in our walk of following Christ.

How much are we prepared to shake off the past? How much are we prepared to let God wash off the dust of the past, the grime that might be stuck there from past difficult journeys or places along the way? That sort of build-up on the soles of our feet can slow us down for the journey ahead; the memory of it can even stop us venturing further, and if left unattended can cause discomfort and calluses, hardness of self.

Whose feet are we prepared to wash, and conversely, whom would we allow to wash our feet? Right now imagine the person who vexes you most, someone who has caused you great sorrow, and imagine yourself holding their feet and washing them in love. Now imagine them doing that for you.

If you dare to allow Christ to wash your feet, if you place yourself completely in his hands, and follow him on his terms in servanthood and trust, this night may well become different from all other nights for you in your life.

Amen.