

Maundy Thursday
St Luke's, Tutshill, 2024

Exodus 12: 1-4, [5-10], 11-14

1 Cor 11:23-26

John 13: 1-17, 31b-35

‘Peter said to Jesus, “you will never wash my feet.” Jesus answered, “unless I wash you, you have no share with me.”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Tonight’s service is amongst the richest of the year, in terms of its themes and imagery. Indeed, it is so rich that it has the risk of causing a bit of spiritual indigestion, because there are so many things to think about, and for the preacher there is a real risk of trying to say very much too much. Trying to preach on everything, with the result that the congregation remember nothing.

I’m going to try to resist that. But at the beginning, let’s just note all of the things that we remember in this service. There’s something about celebration and praise here. We might have spotted that we used the Gloria a few moments ago - that’s something that we tend not to use during Lent, but it comes back tonight because part of the theme of this evening is celebration. Because we are remembering the institution of the Lord’s Supper - Holy Communion. We hear the origin story of the Eucharist tonight, and so as we gather around the table, we are more aware than ever of how connected we are to the earthly life of Christ, and how nourished we are as we participate in this sacred meal. So there is one thing to think about, this evening.

Then we also have washing of the feet. And most of the hymns this evening have been chosen to reflect that theme. There are things here about service. There are things about how the Christian ought to be known. How do we recognise a Christian? Well, the job description, if you like, that Christ sets out tonight, is that we love one another. And in a moment or two when I have finished speaking, that will be symbolically enacted as the vicar and other members of the ministry team wash feet. Kneeling in front of someone else and cleaning their foot, the part of the body that takes probably the most punishment, is an act of humility and love and self-sacrifice, and of course those are all of the characteristics that Jesus shows as he moves through these last hours of his earthly life.

And then there is the way the service ends. You will know if you have been to this service many times before, and you won’t fail to notice even if this is your first time, that this service doesn’t end in the normal way. Usually, services end with a big final hymn and a blessing. We will sing no hymn tonight. We will receive no blessing tonight. In fact, there will be no blessing at any of our services until Easter, because the service doesn’t really end tonight. Instead, we will watch as the church is stripped of all of its adornments, and then we will simply wait in silence and darkness, with just a couple of twinkling candles away in the distance, symbolising Christ praying alone in Gethsemane. And the church building symbolises two important things tonight. Of course the church is the symbol of Christ, and as the church is stripped, we are if you like doing something visual to remind us, to reenact in some way, the way in which Christ will be stripped, not only of his clothes, but of his freedom, his dignity, and eventually his life, as the events of tonight flow into tomorrow. ‘Hands that flung stars into space to cruel nails surrendered’, as we will sing in a few moments.

But tonight the *building* also symbolises *us*. The church. The people of God. Because of course we know that what happens as that first Maundy Thursday evening flows into Good Friday is that the disciples, too, are stripped: of their courage, of their conviction, of their integrity. And certainly in the case of one disciple that the Gospel according to St Mark records, yes of his clothes as well. You might remember that Mark tells us that one disciple, running away from the Garden of Gethsemane, has his loincloth grabbed by a soldier, and he is so terrified that he leaves the loincloth in the hand of the soldier and runs away naked. And that is symbolic of what happens to all the disciples, and indeed, sometimes, to us. And that's why some of us will wait in church for an hour or so after this service ends. Before we, eventually, also abandon Christ and go out into the dark.

So those are the big three symbols tonight. Holy Communion. Washing the feet. And then the stripping of the church and the waiting in the darkness until Good Friday dawns. And as I say, that's quite a lot to reflect on.

Here's one golden thread that might be useful. And, paradoxically, it's to do with Judas. We thought a bit about him yesterday at the Wednesday communion. It's just worth noting that Judas is present for the first Holy Communion, and for the washing of the feet. The golden thread that weaves its way through Maundy Thursday, this service that begins in celebration and praise, and ends in silence and darkness, is of course love. The *extraordinary* act of love is yet to come. That's tomorrow, on the Cross. But all of these other amazing acts of love tonight are building towards the Cross. They are telling us something important about what the Cross is going to do, what the Cross is going to achieve. And I think it's really important that Judas is included. We heard in our gospel reading that 'the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon

Iscariot to betray Jesus', and we know from the bit of the gospel reading that was missed out tonight, but that we heard yesterday, Jesus knows what Judas is going to do as well. And yet... And yet... he breaks bread and shares wine and says 'this is my body which is given for you', and he gives it to Judas as well. When he takes up a towel and kneels before the disciples to wash their feet, he washes the feet of Judas as well.

Whatever else this amazing love, this amazing grace might be, it is inclusive. It is stretched out to everyone, the door is open for all of us to come home. And that tells us something about what 'home' might be like. Aelred of Rievaulx, an English Cistercian of the 12th century, wrote this:

'Now then go up with our Lord into the large upper room, furnished for supper, and rejoice to share the delights of the meal which brings us salvation... When he rises from table, girds himself with the towel and pours water into the basin, consider what majesty it is that is washing and drying the feet of mere mortals, what graciousness it is that touches with his sacred hands the feet of the traitor. Look and wait and, last of all, give him your own feet to wash...'

What graciousness it is that touches with his sacred hands the feet of the traitor.

And the unfolding story of the next 24 hours is the story of sacred hands touching the feet of traitors. That is the definition of amazing grace.

The world is fed, even when it doesn't know that it is hungry. The world is washed, even when it doesn't know how dirty it is. The world is redeemed, even though it didn't know it needed it.

But Judas is gone before the end. He has already disappeared into the night before Jesus and the disciples go out to the garden. So he doesn't hear the question: 'could you not watch with me for one hour?' He is not interested in waiting and watching. He wants to be active. He wants to be in control. He is already betraying. But we are here. We hear that invitation to watch and wait with Christ over these next two days. And as everything is stripped away the end of this service, we are really left with nothing other than hope in that amazing grace. Even if you only stay for a short time tonight, feel the silence. There will be readings every quarter of an hour, but other than that we will just wait. We will have to sink deep into prayer that is more about being than doing. More about hope than solution. Just waiting alongside Christ. Waiting for our salvation.

Amen.