

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Thursday, April 6, 2023

Maundy Thursday

The Mass of the Lord's Supper

5:30 a.m.)

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Elaine Farmer

on

Exodus 12:1-14; Psalm 116:1-2, 11-18; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35

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Touching the Mystery A Sermon Series for Holy Week 2023 Love in the Ordinary

...my soul lay out of sight,
Untuned, unstrung;
My feeble spirit, unable to look right,
Like a nipped blossom, hung
Discontented.¹

And discontented we will remain, like George Herbert's nipped blossom, until we can wrestle to the ground this week that fickleness within us. It's a bothersome force, fickleness, pulling us between those other two characteristics of human nature — 'the fact of evil, [and] the difficulty of virtue'.² These three have snapped at our heels all this Holy Week journey. And so we continue ...

Evening has come to Jerusalem and we've followed Jesus and his disciples into an upstairs room where they are to dine. We stand off in a corner. Watching and none too comfortable there. All week we've trailed behind this man. Intrigued and challenged. Like those Greeks who wanted to see him, to ask him all kinds of questions about who he really is and what his teaching and preaching are really about. We went to that other little dinner party in the quiet village of Bethany where Jesus lauded Mary for her extraordinary and extravagant anointing, letting down her hair to wipe his feet. We've found ourselves fickle and feeble, wanting to adopt the loving and humble ways of this man, wanting the spiritual understanding and humility of Mary, but too tied to our own wills and ways to want to give them up.

We've heard Jesus talk about the god of compassion whose call we should heed. Maundy Thursday's about retuning our souls to what that god of compassion requires. Which is more than an exercise about 'loving one's neighbour'. Today's about moving beyond feel-good words which will only keep us firmly treading the path of self-righteousness and pride. So what are we to do? It's the Maundy Thursday question. And it doesn't mean, "how can I be virtuous and secure my salvation?" It means, "how am I to serve others' needs and participate in the struggle for a more just world?"³ If we don't ask that question, we're only trying to prove our personal purity to ourselves, to others — and to God, I suppose. Which means — well, we might die with clean hands — but we'll have unclean hearts.⁴

Today's foot washing is a good place to start thinking about service. This liturgy, says one writer, is like "a message, like a note slipped into a sleeve, about how love will break our hearts".⁵ A gift of love, compassion and understanding offered with the most gentle courtesy. All we are required to do is accept this gift and

hand it on — to whomever we meet. We can afford to be generous. There's plenty to go round and no spectacular gestures are required. Jesus' compassion was unlimited but his gestures were small. His goal was not himself — but us. That we might stop, and take stock of ourselves.

What interests Jesus is love and how we serve with love. Foot washing's the ultimate demonstration of service with love. T.S. Eliot called it "a love that's lived in, but not looked at".⁶ It's not easy, this love. It demands willingness to give everything even if that means life. It's confronting to note that, in his gospel, John uses the same Greek verb for Jesus' taking off his robe as he does elsewhere for laying down life⁷. This is our Maundy Thursday model: an action of limitless love — given away.

When we kneel barefoot in front of another person we are exposed. Feet are naked in a way hands are not. Somehow more vulnerable — like the fragile secret places of our souls, or the hurt rejected places of those who know themselves to be considered 'outsiders'. Stripped bare, feet look soft, pockmarked. Striped by the weave of socks, the lines of shoes. Twisted, lived-in and worldly-wise, but shy and innocent at the same time. When someone washes our feet we are literally in another's hands. It's a moment wrapped with intimacy and mystery and yet utterly ordinary. And it is gift. It means lumps in throats and tears in eyes because somehow it's like being washed inside. Compassion and magnanimity are flushed out of us. Shot through with love, we can then make all kinds of promises to God about how we're going to get it right from now on! Extravagant promises. And sad, because we know we'll likely follow the promises by saying, "oh, this was just being sentimental and now I can go back to being normal". To nothing changed in fact.

That's thinking we have to resist. But be comforted. Though our promises may sometimes be slipshod or grudging, there's nothing slipshod or grudging about the grace of the God who is ready to back them up. We can never know how God gives life and power beyond our intentions to a word spoken, a gift given, a hand extended, an effort expended.⁸

But this still leaves us within our comfort zone, locked into concern about our salvation. We still face the question: how does God require us to respond to the needs of others?

Remember Moses and that burning bush on Mount Horeb? God said to Moses, *I have observed the misery of my people ... I know their sufferings*.⁹ What we are asked to accept today is that that god, from whose awesome presence Moses hid his face,¹⁰ is the same god in whom the whole world has its being. AND much of that world depends on an outstretched hand offering a piece of bread or a cup of water.¹¹ Maundy Thursday's about thinking more about those unfortunate millions who live 'like peasants, [with] a boot on their neck'.¹²

Think of hellholes where lives are smashed by battles for power.

Think of Ukraine, of Afghanistan, of the Middle East.

Think of the forgotten ones whose names will never be heard again.

Think of the remembered ones whose names are whispered by loved ones whose grief will never end.

Think of broken-down streets where some feel left out and others fear their rage. Think of the homeless on the city streets of your country and mine.

Think of the tragedy of so many lives and memories scattered like dying autumn leaves by the toxic winds of indifference or self-interest.

Today is about seeing the face of Christ in everyone — the remembered, the forgotten, the ones whose names we never knew and — dear God, give us strength — the ones we do not ever want to meet or know. Maundy Thursday's about tough seemingly unanswerable problems, about remembering times when we've seen someone in need — and done nothing — and wondering how on earth we'll face Jesus' words, "*just as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me.*"¹³

The foot washing translates into all kinds of gifts of compassion. That cup of water and scrap of bread come in many forms. Remember the film 'The Pianist'? A dark movie of love and resilience, and the spirit of moral goodness surviving the blackest human evil. In Warsaw's ghetto, a Jewish family awaited transportation by the Nazis to who knew where. They were hungry and the father took a single caramel from his pocket and divided it with his pen knife into seven equal pieces, one for each person in the family.

A cup of water. A scrap of bread. A caramel. Tired feet washed clean. All Maundy Thursday gifts of love and compassion. Foot-washing means doing something for someone else that might just be difficult. Jesus never said it'd be easy. Peter resisted. "*You'll never wash my feet!*" He was appalled that Jesus would act like a slave. Peter's resistance is the final cry of pride at the last barricade in humankind's battle against God. The barricades at the trench where we dig ourselves in, determined to win the day. We resist as Peter did.

Instead of resisting, we must pause ... and think of the Christ ... and ask with the psalmist, "*how shall I repay the Lord: for all his benefits to me?*"¹⁴ We can begin by praying to Christ, whose feet were caressed with perfume and a woman's hair; who humbly took basin and towel and washed the feet of his friends; that he would wash us also in tenderness as we wash one another;¹⁵ that we might have the courage to have the same compassion for others as God has for us.

And, in that upper room? We're standing in the corner, watching. Supper is over. Jesus stands looking out the window. His eyes are sad. He can see the figure of Judas moving quickly along the street below, his shadow long and black on the pavement among the lengthening evening shadows. Jesus knew it would come to this. That Judas would fail. That he would not see that the kingdom of God was never about throwing out the Romans and reclaiming the land of their ancestors. It was about reclaiming human hearts for God. Poor Judas! Fantasies of political freedom and glory were too strong for Judas to resist. "They clung like bats to the inner walls of his skull, and no amount of prayer would dislodge them."¹⁶ Jesus' heart is laden with love and grief and dread of what must be. He will soon leave the room with his disciples and make his way to the Kidron Valley to pray, to wait — for the end that is fast running towards him, ready to steal his life from him.

Jesus had said to his disciples as they sat around that table, "*[My betrayer] is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.*"¹⁷ And he gave it to Judas. Now he turns from the window, sees us standing in the corner of the room. His eyes rest upon us, questioningly, lovingly. The question is, will he offer us a piece of bread?

¹ George Herbert 'Denial', Vs.5, in *Praying with the English Poets*, compiled by Ruth Etchells, Triangle, London, 1990, p.61

² A.N.Wilson, *The Vicar of Sorrows*, Penguin, 1994, pp.286-287.

³ Based on Walter Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence. A Third Way*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2003, p.6. As the title of this book suggests, Wink's context is rather more specific than the general point of this sermon but his questions quoted here are relevant nonetheless.

⁴ Walter Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence. A Third Way*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2003, p.6 . Wink is quoting from William Robert Miller, *Nonviolence*, Schocken, New York, 1972, p.51

⁵ Nora Gallagher, *Things Seen and Unseen. A Year Lived in Faith*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1998, p.116

⁶ A line from Eliot's last play. Source not noted.

⁷ See John 10:11, 15, 17 and 18. Raymond E. Brown, S.S., *The Gospel According to John (XIII-XXI)*, The Anchor Bible Series, p.551

⁸ Fred B. Craddock *et al*, (Eds), *Preaching Through the Christian Year, Year C*, Trinity Press International, Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, 1994, p.164

⁹ Exodus 3:7-8 selectively

¹⁰ Exodus 3:6b

¹¹ This idea comes from the sermon 'Royalty Stoops', on Mt 25:31-46, by Fleming Rutledge. A sermon for Christ the King which focuses on the power of symbols, specifically the combination of royalty and stooping to the neglected. (internet source: <http://www.religion-online.org/cgi-bin/researchd.dll/showarticle?ite..>) Site last viewed 7/3/2017.

¹² John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus. A Revolutionary biography*, HarperSanFrancisco, San Francisco, 1995, p.71

¹³ Matthew 25:40

¹⁴ Ps, 116:11, translation in *A Prayer Book for Australia*, Broughton Books, 1995, p.347

¹⁵ This prayer is an adaptation of the prayer for Maundy Thursday in Janet Morley, *All Desires Known*, SPCK, London, 1994, p.13

¹⁶ This is an adaptation from Pat Barker, *Double Vision*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1993, p.270. This sentence is preceded by 'The fantasies of revenge hadn't gone.'

¹⁷ John 13:26