

MAUNDY THURSDAY 2016

John 13.1-15

Tonight's service is a disturbing service – perhaps that is one reason why so few people come. And when they come, it is often hard to persuade people to take off their shoes and socks and allow the minister to wash their feet. Somehow we feel exposed, embarrassed. And we know our feet are not pretty.

Our gospel reading tonight tells us that the disciples had even greater doubts. When Jesus took off his outer robe and girded a towel around him, over his simple homespun tunic, you can imagine the disciples looking at each other, wondering, *What is going on? That's the slave's job.*

Of course, Peter is the one who speaks up -- *You shall never wash my feet.* Jesus' response is just as direct: *Unless I wash you, you have no share with me* -- you have no share in my mission, no share in my redemptive ministry, no share in my Kingdom. The followers of Jesus must be prepared to minister to others, but must also be prepared to accept Jesus' ministry to them – in his teaching, in his death and resurrection, and in his presence in the sacrament and in prayer.

Jesus even knelt to wash the feet of Judas, knowing that he had the 30 pieces of silver in his purse. There was no limit to his love. Sadly, many of his followers find it hard to love people who disagree with them. Parish squabbles turn many people away from God.

The gospel writer tells us why Jesus ministers to us and why we need to minister to others – in doing so, we discover our essential humanity and that our destiny is to live in and for our Creator, our heavenly Father. This is clear from verse 8, Jesus, *knowing that he had come from God and was going to God* -- we, too, owe our life to God, and when we pass over from this life into eternal life, we shall go to God, and nothing else will matter except living in his presence.

In the meantime, we are called to follow Jesus' example and serve others, even in the most basic ways. Again, we know this from tonight's reading – this is the only time the gospels record Jesus saying, *I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.* We are not called on to turn water into wine, or to walk on water, or to bring people back from the dead, these are all signs of Jesus' divinity – but we are called to do the most menial tasks for other people, as we have the opportunity. Those are the signs of our God-given humanity.

Paul's letter to Timothy tells us that the early church practiced some kind of ritual footwashing; but some parts of the church dropped the practice for many centuries. In St Peter's, only men could have their feet washed on Maundy Thursday, until 2013, when Pope Francis broke the mould and included two women in the 12 people whose feet he knelt down to wash; for more than 400 years,

Archbishops of Canterbury did not themselves wash people's feet during this day's ceremonies, until Rowan Williams restored this traditional act of humility in 2003. For many centuries, many bishops and priests expected to be served, not to serve – they had forgotten a key teaching of the Gospel. Or they had rejected it.

One Maundy Thursday Marty and I were in Jerusalem on a study course. We went to three different footwashings – in the parvis, in the open space in front of the church of the Holy Sepulchre, and later in two different cathedrals. And we sensed that the ceremony could easily become nothing more than a ceremony – a ritual re-enactment of a past event, something that was expected of the bishop on Maundy Thursday, but had no significance for other people, at other times.

If so, Jesus' message has been lost – we need to read on to verse 16: *Very truly, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them.* Jesus served the disciples as a slave was expected to serve his master's guests – to wash the dirt of the dusty road from their feet before they had their meal. And, after that, he presided at the Passover meal, transforming the ancient Jewish ceremony into a memorial of his coming death until his coming again, just as, tonight, Peter will wash our feet and then preside over the Holy Communion.

The one ceremony is a preparation for the other. We are reminded that the one who did the dirty work for his disciples is the one who died to redeem all humankind. If we are to have a share in his mission, we need to learn to be the servant of others as he was the servant of all; and we need to be continually nourished by the body and the blood of the Lord to have the strength of mind and will to love him and to follow his example in newness of life. The Lord be with you.