

Sermon Evensong Ordinary Sunday 18 Year A 2020

It is one of the blessings of international travel that we have the opportunity to be exposed to different cultures and customs. Even if that prospect for us now seems so incredibly remote and unattainable, some of us perhaps can draw on memories of past experiences. When we might next be able to leave these shores and explore God's good, wide world once more will be a good while yet. But this pause in our globe-trotting hopefully gives the global family a chance to rest, to recover from the weight of so much coming and going.

I count myself amongst the blessed that I have had chance to travel before now. One of the things I am grateful for has been the chance to experience different cultures in different countries. Not surprisingly I am a keen observer of different religious practices. Churches, temples, synagogues and mosques in different parts of Asia and Europe I have visited. A common tradition in many places and across the faiths is the removal of shoes before entering the sacred place. Those of you with Asian friends will know shoes are never worn in the house. So, if not in houses, much less so the house of God. Yes, I have seen it at Buddhist and Hindu temples and mosques. Sometimes hundreds and hundreds of pairs of footwear in a kind of orderly chaos outside the sacred enclosure. But it is not unfamiliar in our own tradition as well. I've seen it at Thai cathedrals and in bamboo-and-leaf churches in refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border: the same practice of leaving shoes at the door. I have even seen the practice observed here, when allowing some visitors into the church who wanted to pray - at this altar rail - before the Blessed Sacrament. They carefully removed their shoes and left them at the chancel steps.

The removing of one's shoes, then, before entering the holy place, before approaching the Divine, is not just a curious, eccentric 'foreign custom' but appears to be a deeply ingrained human instinct. We - so removed from habits of respect and so casual in our approach - have forgotten much of this. When Moses encountered God in the Burning Bush he was told, *remove your sandals, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground*. This is a deep part of our own tradition. And we are reminded of it in the gospel portion placed before us tonight. Jesus, the Burning Bush of the New Covenant, who reveals the very presence of God, by his disciples must be approached bare foot. But as so often, in Jesus the sign and symbol of the gesture is subverted or at least charged with layers of new meaning.

Do you know what I have done to you? ... If I your Lord and teacher have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.

Yes, we approach Christ with reverence, awe, respect. But in the Christian vision of things we are also to hold *each other* in reverence and respect, to recognise God's living breath in all members of the human family, and in particular the least of his brothers and sisters. Recognising the sanctity of each human life - the image of God in each person - is one of the greatest contributions to the ethical life the church has given the world. Yes, we seek to reverence each other. But perhaps more challenging, we are to allow *ourselves* to receive the service and care, the devotion and reverence of others. This ought to be the mark of communities.

Yes, from our casual, relaxed indifference we could learn from peoples of other places and other cultures, in which the reverence shown God is humble and natural. We might not need in our culture and context (and on these winter nights!) to literally remove our shoes. But some restoration of hushed wonder and other attitudes of reverence, devotion, humility and awe we would do right to foster.

Before the Holy, we ought to remove the shoes from our hearts. But lest we spiritualise our faith and think only the vertical dimensions of belief is what matters, our Lord calls us also to the horizontal. He reminds us feet need washing. Each other's. And our own. Amen.