

Holy Thursday 2024

I was at a wedding mass at St. Benedict's in Burwood about 10 years ago, where at one stage during the ceremony both the bride and groom took off their shoes and washed each other's feet! It was a bit of a shock for most people as many have never witnessed something like that in a wedding mass. I thought to myself, what a wonderful appropriate symbolic action the foot washing is in a wedding ceremony! As this young couple entered the sacrament of marriage they wanted to emphasize that they are there to wash each other, to sanctify each other, to make them holy, as they serve each other in humility and love. They are a wonderful practicing catholic family with 6 kids, and the husband is a clinical psychologist helping couples thrive in their relationships, among other things.

In our Gospel for Maundy Thursday, The dialogue with Peter begins with his profoundest shock: "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" This is utterly inappropriate, the turning of upside-down of every human order of rank, and this to the fullest extent, since not even a free Israelite, let alone the "Lord and Teacher" could be given the task of washing the feet, but only a slave. When Jesus replied "What I am doing you do not know now, but afterward you will understand, Peter said to him yet again "You shall never wash my feet"!

Together with Peter, we might struggle to understand, this confusing gesture of Jesus. How could Peter who confessed that Jesus was the Messiah, allow him to clean his dirty feet? God is above, man is below. If Jesus had asked Peter to wash his feet instead, Peter would have had no struggle! Most of us too, would not hesitate to wash Jesus's feet, but imagine Jesus wants to kneel in front of you and wash your feet. Imagine how uncomfortable that would be...and ask yourself why would it be so. It is way more comfortable to keep our dirt, our darkness, our sin, our hurt, and our pain hidden away. But Jesus wants to wash

us, he wants to make us clean again, and he desires to heal us and make us whole again, for him to do that we need to be vulnerable before him and let him wash us. Jesus desires to take our sin upon himself, this is the Lord's service as a slave, it's not so much the literal dirt on Peter's Feet; the one who is utterly pure and sinless takes sin upon himself in his cleansing of our souls.

That is why Jesus says to Peter as the dialogue progresses "If I do not wash you, you have no part in me." Then Peter gets excited as he usually does with his religious zeal and says "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands, and my head!" because he acknowledges his sin committed by his hands and head! Peter now wants to be fully cleansed, healed, purified, and holy. But Jesus assures him, that once Peter's feet are clean all of him will be clean. Once we are comfortable with bringing our darkest, deepest sins and hurt to the Lord, everything else will be cleansed and healed as well. Preachers tend to emphasize the service narrative of this Gospel on Holy Thursday, but more importantly, there is a baptismal reference to the foot washing. Jesus is about to sacrifice himself on the cross to heal and save a fallen, sinful humanity, unless we humble ourselves and vulnerably receive his cleansing baptismal waters we too will have no part in him.

As evening falls on Holy Thursday we cross a significant threshold. Dusk ushers in the great three days of Christian observance, the Paschal Triduum. Lent has come to a quiet end after a flurry of liturgical activity: Palm Sunday celebrations, reconciliation services, and the final preparations of candidates for confirmation for us here at All Saints. The season of renewal and purification has run its course; now it is time to gather for the Christian Passover.

Like Jesus' garment, the liturgies of the Triduum form a seamless whole. The Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper, the Celebration of the Lord's Passion, the Easter Vigil, and Easter Day all celebrate the same great mystery of faith: the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ to heal and save us. This is made plain at

the outset. The Introit for this evening's Eucharist declares it for all to hear: But as for us, it behoveth us to glory in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ: in whom is our salvation, our life, and resurrection; by whom we were saved and obtained our freedom. Could it be clearer? And if this proclamation were not sufficient, we are gently reminded again and again as the days progress. Each succeeding liturgy begins and ends in silence. We are welcomed with a greeting when we gather on this Thursday evening and are not dismissed until the Easter Eucharist comes to a close. It is as if we are invited to experience the three principal liturgies as movements in one symphony. History and mystery interweave in an observance whose profound meaning takes three days to unfold.

So, listen to the words of Jesus who says "You are not all clean" and allow him to serve us, allow him to be your slave even if you do not understand it, and allow him to save us by washing us; mind, body, and soul. When this healing and saving action of Jesus deepens in our lives, we too will be empowered to serve others and help them in washing themselves clean, healed, restored, and loved. Tonight we pray with a heightened consciousness of the fierce dedication that gave rise to the Eucharist. We are more intensely aware of the passion with which Jesus loved his Father and his friends until death. We know that to supper at the table with Jesus is to commit ourselves to love and live in this way. And how do we love each other? By washing each other's feet. "Unless you learn to wash each other's feet, you'll never know what true love is."

And so with great joy, we celebrate tonight this most happy Holy Thursday. We celebrate the fact that Jesus comes to us in this very special way and will continue to come to us in this very special way as long as we need him to save us. And then we will begin to understand the great graciousness of God Himself, for God is a giver and when we learn to give, we touch God.