

Holy Thursday
5/04/2007

Mark the Evangelist

John 13: 1 – 17, 31b - 35

Washing Feet & Following Jesus
A New Commandment

Sermon by Rodney Horsfield

In the ancient world the ritual of washing the feet of guests was reserved for those of low status. In a society of sandals and dirt roads and a culture without antifungal soap, disinfectants and latex gloves such an action was a nasty business. It was not a job you volunteered for.

So when Jesus removes his outer tunic, ties up his inner robes and takes towel and basin in hand, the disciples are shocked to say the least. Leave it to Peter, assertive and clueless at the same time, to declare that what Jesus is doing is inappropriate. He does not want a teacher who debases himself. Peter is embarrassed by such a thing. But he is soundly chastened by Jesus, who states clearly that if he continues to refuse to let Jesus wash him, he is ready to exclude him from the circle.

It is significant that John's gospel makes this event, the washing of feet, the pivotal event in the upper room on this critical night. It is not surprising that John is out of step with the Synoptic Gospels at this point. What is surprising is that John, who made the sacramental connection out of Jesus' feeding of the thousands, fails even to mention Jesus' giving of himself in the Passover meal. The only one he gives bread to is Judas, the betrayer. So this washing carries a great deal of weight. So much so that this evening, Maundy Thursday, is named not for communion or the Last Supper, but for this action of the washing of feet and the commandment that Jesus gives by way of explaining its significance.

“Just as I have loved you, so you also ought to love one another.”

Jesus demonstrates in this simple act of washing feet that his is a love that gives itself in humble service. It is a love that expects nothing in return, other than that it be passed along to others. It is a love that cares not for status, place, dignity, comfort and maybe not even for health and safety. It is a love that transcends the boundary of death. It is a love that traverses the height, depth, width and breadth of existence, to hold the cosmos in its embrace. As John writes, “For God so loved the cosmos that he gave his son...”

Following Jesus

We who follow Christ point to him by our actions. For in his life of giving, he shows that the great among us are not those with wealth and power, with fame and talent, prestige and position. In God's gentle and just reign, it is the servants who are most like their sovereign. It is those who take up their towels; it is the ones who take up their cross and bear them into the world as witnesses who are truly his disciples.

As we journey again this week through the events of Jesus' life and death, let us keep in mind that this ministry of Jesus has been entrusted to us. It is our calling as disciples, that through our service of disinterested love, the world may come to know the God who stoops to wash another's feet.

We know and remember notable followers over the centuries who have obeyed Jesus command. From Stephen to Francis to Theresa of Calcutta, they have been those unafraid to go and feed the widow and orphan, to embrace the leper, to wash the feet of the poor, following the example of Christ. They embody who and how Jesus' church has gone about the business of loving and washing feet; of doing the thankless serving jobs for others from which they cannot hope to gain. It is not always such striking figures in history who do this. These actions are done by countless, unknown disciples all over the world each day. Perhaps we have received their ministry, or we know them for caring for the least lovable ones in our community. Perhaps, sometimes, we are among them.

But sometimes we are like Peter; we do not want the service that God gives in Jesus. But God knows we need it. We face the streets of the world with our souls ill shod and unprepared for the dust and the dirt and the sharp edged stones and the infection in our wounds. And Jesus tenderly, carefully, lays us bare and washes us clean, at his own expense. From one perspective this is quite un-Godlike and even experienced Christians baulk, like Peter, at the prospect.

Can we do it? Love one another as I have loved you? That is the question. Can we see the kinship we have with one another in Jesus enough to wash one another's feet without turning our stomachs at the sight and smell of our real humanity? Can we find that the poor and the needy are both nearby and a matter for our care and concern? Can we give our lives in love and service?

Maybe not. But Jesus did. For those whose lives are cleansed by him, washed by his love, disciples then and now, that makes all the difference in the world.