

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord--and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

"Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

---

What do we do with this strangely intimate incident? On the night before the Empire murdered him, Jesus interrupted the meal that Paul wrote about to the Corinthians. He got down on the floor in front of his friends to perform one of the lowliest acts of service possible in the ancient Mediterranean world. An act of loving humility that even Peter could not comprehend.

We could take the scene, as many do, to be a simple story about humble service. And while it is that, John adds an important little twist. Jesus washes clean feet. According to stringent Middle Eastern customs of hospitality, a servant would have already washed the disciple's feet before they came into the upper room of the house for dinner.

John must want us to discover a deeper meaning; an enhanced awareness of how God works through tangible, material objects to reveal some aspect of God's presence.

Ever since I was a little boy, I have loved being part of the Anglican sacramental tradition. Incense and bells, beautiful textiles and real beeswax, real bread and good wine, music and movement, blessed water and oil – the Holy Spirit uses all these created things to reveal the Divine to us, and we in turn use all these very things to convey the deeper Divine intent in creation.

But as Abbot Cyprian at New Camaldoli Hermitage once said: "There is no symbolic sacramental liturgical gesture more bald and striking than this one, the washing of the feet."

The Abbot is right.

We can use little wafers at the Eucharist that are easier to accept as the body of Christ than to accept as bread. And for many years, we got away with sprinkling an apologetic few droplets of water in private baptism ceremonies.

But on Maundy Thursday, the presider really has to wash peoples' feet.

The early church was open to considering foot-washing as a sacrament; a visible ritual given to us by Jesus that confers grace. Through sacramental actions, God is present to us in particular ways, not because of what we have done, but by pure grace. God comes to us in some sacraments to cleanse and purify us, in others to bless us and in others to awaken gifts in us.

Jesus lived his entire life sacramentally, died a sacramental death and here, John's Jesus tells his followers that they are obliged to wash one another's feet. Every sacrament in the church connects liturgy to action in the world. And our ancestors in the faith took Jesus at his word when he said, "For I have given you an example so that, just as I have done for you, you may do as well."

Now, I'm guessing that most of us don't wash our dinner guests' feet before they come in and even fewer do it between the salad course and the roast. The custom is so strange, in fact, that it can distract even the most well-meaning followers of Christ.

Agape dinners become pretend Passover seders, despite compelling evidence that the disciples are gathered for just a typical Jewish dinner and not a seder. John's Gospel refers only to an evening meal taking place before the feast of the Passover. And then there's the fact that we aren't Jews.

Even when we stay in our lane, we can over-sanitize Christian rituals until they become elegant at the cost of some *humanizing* grime and funk. Benedictine monk Fr. Gregory Collins tells about going to what he called a "gorgeously ornate liturgy" in the Holy Land where one bishop washed the feet of "twelve sumptuously attired colleagues, each one of whom was wearing a mitre almost as big as himself."

"One would hope," Fr. Gregory writes, "that the reverend gentlemen were deeply imbued with the [self-emptying] spirit of their Lord but the visual effect tended to work somewhat in the opposite direction."

Well, it's easy to tease our brothers and sisters who do things a little differently than we do. And maybe some of the excesses are just the consequences of over-enthusiastic misunderstandings like Peter's. There are surely layers of meaning and countless responses available. I just don't want to overlook the one meaning right at the surface.

Jesus washed *clean* feet and right in the middle of a meal.

This evening, the first movement of the Triduum, is an expansion of what we do every Sunday. This evening is an act of allowing ourselves to be cleansed in preparation. This evening, and over the next three days, we will share the blessed bread and wine of the heavenly banquet; we will recall Christ's death and then we will proclaim and live out the resurrection. We will renew the promise of our baptisms. Then we will go out into the world acting in response to the liturgy by radiating the love of Christ in humble service.

This evening is a deeper dive into the mystery of the Eucharist.

Through the coming days, we seek to realize more fully what we have received from Christ and what we hand on. Jesus took a loaf of bread and said, "This is my body..."

Now, the Greek word for body that Paul used in his letter to the Corinthians is *soma*. There is another word with an overlapping meaning, *sarx*, that refers to the literal flesh. The holy sacramental meal that Jesus gave us is not a gruesome act of cannibalism. Instead, "soma" refers to the whole embodied self. "This," Jesus is saying, "is my entire being, all that I am, that is for you."

And when we receive that body, that *soma*, we are compelled to embody all that Christ is and all that we are. "For I have given you an example so that what I have done you also must do." We receive and are compelled to embody the new command, the new "maundy": To love each other as Christ has loved us."

Grime and funk and all.

Tomorrow, at the foot of the cross, we contemplate what it means to empty ourselves until we become a purified and completely open vessel for the Holy Spirit to fill with God's grace for others. At the glorious celebration of Pascha at the end of the week, Christ is resurrected in us, and we go forth into the world renewed to act, to serve in our own expressions of the example that Jesus gave us.

I invite you this evening to grant your consent to be cleansed. To give your entire selves into God's hands. I invite you to receive and embody Christ's commandment to love.

---

Works consulted or cited:

Collins, Gregory. *Meeting Christ in His Mysteries: A Benedictine Vision of the Spiritual Life*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010.