

40 days of Lent end this evening. 40 days ago, we took on acts of prayer, fasting and charity. We let go of old habits and took up new practices all in preparation for the transition out of Lent this Maundy Thursday evening into the one liturgy that spans three days, the ancient Triduum.

This is our approach the glorious high point of the liturgical year. And so, it must seem strange to some folks to see us gather in this holy place where time is more fluid to re-experience lives without Jesus; to participate in a world that can't feel the presence of Christ.

Some of our brothers and sisters in Christ will gather not far from St. Elizabeth for "pizza-and-movie" night on Friday. We're just up to something different. Once we put the rough-cut, juniper-wood cross away tomorrow, this nave will go dark and silent as the tomb until Saturday night.

With millions of others, I watched last Monday as Notre-Dame de Paris burned. I was all French that day. And as I felt my heart breaking, I also couldn't help but think of the new fire that we light at Great Vigil of Easter – a ritual that recognizes that the world as we know it is symbolically destroyed and truly recreated in the Pascha mystery.

Witness the outpouring of generosity and hope, the new life already anticipated for Our Lady of Paris, and the admittedly temporary suspension of hostilities and yearning for unity in the French people.

This is the Three-Day liturgy before the ancient church baptized new Christians into the body of Christ; the Three-day ritual before we renew our own promises. And so we choose to join those just becoming aware of Christ by recalling the days of darkness and disorientation before the Resurrection. I am among those who will also remember the personal darkness that nearly overcame me before I woke up to the love of Christ.

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As we gather and chant and read and pray in the darkness, we each stand at the cusp of a decision. Shall we choose to continue our commitment to God or no? Do we wish to renew baptismal promises so intently focused on life in sincere relationship with others or no? Will we choose life, with all its risks and uncertainties, or will we choose the predictability and certainty of seclusion and death?

I don't mean the physical death that lies ahead for each of us, but death, as theologian Dorothee Sölle ("Dorotee Zwailla") once wrote, as: "...that purposeless, empty existence devoid of genuine relationships and filled with anxiety, silence and loneliness."

Each of us experiences the peculiarities of life in this world uniquely. And in this world of fear and resentment, many choose the kind of unbridled individualism that *feels* like freedom even as it isolates and imprisons. Others choose to be up to something else.

The gift of the 40 days of Lent leads us to the brink of this decision. In Lent, we accept the invitation for God to help us strip away those behaviors and addictions that dim the light of Christ within us. And we add behaviors and actions that, through the grace of God, strengthen our participation in the life of Christ as a learning practitioner in a church community.

We trust that choices we make for the good of our relationships in Christ for our friends and families, for our parish, will increase the freedom in the people around us. Ironically, that true freedom is found for us in the form of the commandment that we receive on Maundy Thursday.

"Love one another. Even as I have loved you...you also love one another." And there is an expansion of that command: "Forgive one another as I have forgiven you."

The first 12 chapters of John's Gospel emphasize God's attachment, commitment and loyalty to the children of Israel scattered throughout the Mediterranean. Those characteristics are also evident in the relationship

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between Jesus and the disciples. And these are the characteristics of the love that Jesus now insists that his followers show each other in saying: "Love one another as I have loved you." That love may also involve affection, admiration or fondness, but these were secondary qualities in the ancient Mediterranean.

When Jesus challenges his followers to love their enemies, he doesn't mean that we have to like them. He means is something more like "Be committed to the well-being of your enemies; and think, speak, and act in ways that promote their well-being."

Jesus loves, completely and forever, with a commitment to the well-being of each person and the relationships between people. To show his followers this commitment, Jesus washes clean feet in the middle of dinner. 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.

Now, people in the ancient Mediterranean thought that the human personality consisted of three zones of interaction. The eyes and heart symbolized emotion-fused thought; the ears and mouth symbolized self-expressive speech. The hands and feet represented purposeful action, the zone of behavior and activity.

And so, for Jesus washing feet has a deeply symbolic effect. He is washing away actions performed against him. As a parting gesture, Jesus is forgiving even those offenses that have not yet happened.

Peter impulsively reacts to what he thinks Jesus is doing. On the surface, Jesus is acting like a slave toward a superior. As so, stuck on his self-limiting interpretation, Peter says: "You will never wash my feet."

Jesus tells Peter that he has misunderstood and that he will see more clearly later. And what he will come to understand, as we must, is that this act of foot-washing is a sacramental sign of forgiveness that creates solidarity in the community that participates in the sacrament.

Now Peter asks to be completely bathed – another overreaction and an over-estimation of his loyalty that will embarrass him later. Jesus gently corrects Peter: "One who has been bathed has no need to wash, except for the feet." And in doing so, he refocuses his followers on the sacramental action in foot-washing; the forgiveness that builds collective solidarity.

Alan Paton was the author of "*Cry, The Beloved Country*," a novel that may be the most famous in South Africa's history. He also wrote the lesser-known "*Ah, But Your Land is Beautiful*" about a group of men and women whose lives reflect the human costs of maintaining a racially divided society.

And that book tells a story about a white South African judge called Jan Christiaan Oliver. A black pastor had invited the judge to a Maundy Thursday service. Risking his career in the context of apartheid, the judge accepted the invitation.

During the service, he went forward to and found himself kneeling at feet of Martha Fortuin, a woman who had been a servant in his own house for thirty years. Judge Oliver was struck by how weary Martha's feet looked.

Greatly moved, he held her feet with gentle hands and kissed them. Martha wept, as did many others in the room. When the newspapers got wind of the story, Oliver lost his political career. And yet, by choosing to act with Christ-like love, he found his soul.

Tonight, on this Maundy Thursday, we, too, can choose to be up to something unexpected. "By this," Jesus said, "everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

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