

Holy Scripture: John 13:1-16; Philippians 2:4-11

Maundy Thursday

09.04.20

The missing sacrament

Tonight we gather with Jesus and his disciples in that upper room where they met on the night of his arrest, and there they shared a meal together before heading out together to the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus was taken into custody. And it's common tonight, in this service of Holy Week, to remember what Jesus did that night with his disciples by sharing in Holy Communion. On this occasion, however, we will not do that, not particularly because of our unusual circumstances, but because we are following John's account of what took place in that upper room, and he only makes brief reference to a shared meal. He gives far more prominence to something no other gospel records: Jesus' washing of his disciples' feet. So in place of bread and a cup of wine, there is a basin of water and a towel; and instead of Jesus' hands breaking bread and pouring wine, they wash feet.

We could compare and contrast the features of these two actions that took place on this night of betrayal and arrest: on the one hand, the meal that commemorated crucial events that lay at the heart of Jewish identity: the freeing of slaves from Egypt centuries before on the night known as Passover; and on the other hand the taking of a basin and a towel in order to perform the most menial of tasks, one usually assigned to a house servant. And as I imagine the scene here one contrast that strikes me concerns the sounds you would hear in the two scenarios. The Passover meal, after all, would be very wordy. There would be a constant commentary as candles were lit and food shared, and what happened on that fateful night in Egypt and afterwards was recounted. When I imagine Jesus' washing the disciples feet, however, I hear only silence – dumbstruck silence as the disciples witnessed their Lord and Master doing what no lord or master would ever do: just the sound of the water, dripping into the basin. It's an action that speaks louder than words. And actually that is very refreshing, for these chapters in John's Gospel that record that gathering in the upper room that night go on and on. They go on for six, long chapters and it's all words: words, words, words, and it has to be like this for Jesus is giving his parting instructions to his disciples before being taken from them. He has much to say. But here, right at the beginning of this long discourse, there is this blessed silence as Jesus moves from one disciple to another. And, of course, who should break that silence but Peter – Peter, who always has to be the first to speak and to break the silence. He protests at what Jesus is doing – he is never hesitant to challenge Jesus – and suddenly we are back in word-land and Jesus is talking once again, at length.

Now, what makes Jesus' washing of the disciples feet so powerful is that, as well as demonstrating Christ's humility, it is freighted with symbolism. Think of it for a moment: we are told that Jesus left the table they were eating at, and removed his robe, and then he knelt and washed the disciples' feet, and then he put his robe back on and returned to the table. And in those actions do we not see portrayed the whole drama of what we call the Incarnation, God coming to us in Christ? Do we not hear echoes of our reading from Philippians, describing Jesus' descent and exaltation? Think of it: Jesus left the table and laid aside his robe, just as Jesus left the realm of heaven, laying aside his glory and majesty and power; and then he took a basin and a towel just as he took on the yoke of obedience to God in his life on earth; and then he knelt to wash the disciples' feet, just as he died to cleanse us from sin and to save us; and then he put his robe back on, and sat down at the table – just as Jesus rose and ascended, re-clothed with his divine glory, sitting down at the right hand of his Father. Here in this action is portrayed the entire ministry of Jesus from Incarnation, through death and resurrection, to ascension.

Now, what I find interesting about this passage and the event it records is that by and large we have not made very much of Jesus' washing of his disciples' feet. Yes, we refer to it occasionally as a sign of Jesus' humility, and I know that some churches tonight will practice it, and in Rome today the Pope would normally, pre-Corona, have washed the feet of 12 prison inmates, but the washing of the disciples feet is far overshadowed by the other event recorded by the other

Gospel writers, the Last Supper. That is remembered in churches on Thursday of Holy Week by the celebration of Holy Communion far more often than foot washing. And of course that is because Holy Communion is a sacrament of the church, one of the signs by which the church lives and something that we do regularly, whereas foot washing, while it is practiced in some denominations – some more frequently than others - is not considered a sacrament as Holy Communion is.

Well, at the risk of being somewhat controversial, I would suggest that there might be good arguments for including foot washing as a sacrament of the church, and something practiced regularly, and here is why. You see, at least for us Protestants, there are three features of a sacrament: firstly, it symbolises God's grace towards us, as both baptism and the Lord's Supper do; and secondly it involves some physical medium – in the case of baptism, water, in the case of Holy Communion, bread and wine; and thirdly there is a command of the Lord to do it, as Jesus at the last supper said, 'do this in memory of me'. Well, foot washing fulfils all these things. Firstly, it symbolises God's grace towards us, the whole story of the incarnation, as we've seen; and secondly it involves the physical medium of water; and, thirdly, Jesus commanded us to do it. As he says in v.15, 'I have set you an example, that you should do as I have done to you.'

Let me tell you what I think would be gained by having foot washing as a sacrament of the church. You see, the other two sacraments, baptism and Holy Communion, are primarily about our relationship with God. Their primary focus is the 'vertical' dimension of our faith. So, in baptism we are united to Christ, reconciled to God, born again as children of God. And in the Lord's Supper our relationship with God through Christ is reinforced and strengthened as we feed on Jesus. Here, in baptism and Holy Communion, is the Godward dimension of the Christian life, the turn to God as we are drawn into God's eternal life. But in foot washing we turn to one another, and we minister to one another. Here is symbolised the 'horizontal' dimension of our faith, the turn to the neighbour. And both of these are components of the Christian life. The life of discipleship is crossed-shaped: it has a vertical beam and a horizontal beam. And it could be argued that as well as sacraments that speak of God's love and grace towards us, we need a sacrament that speaks of our love and grace towards one another. For truly, as we read in the 1st letter of John in the New Testament, 'The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.'

Perhaps this is especially pertinent to today, and to our current crisis. If ever neighbourliness were called for, it is now. If ever our responsibility to one another is revealed, it is now. If ever, along with washing our own hands, the washing of other people's feet is a powerful symbol, it is now. Perhaps this is the missing sacrament of the Christian church. Perhaps we would be a more complete church if we were to practice it and what it signifies. Perhaps, here and now, we need it more than ever. Amen.