

SCRIPTURE

John 13:1–17, 31b–35

Jesus Washes the Disciples' Feet

13 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. 2 The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper 3 Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, 4 got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. 5 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. 6 He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" 7 Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." 8 Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." 9 Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" 10 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." 11 For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."

12 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? 13 You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. 14 So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. 15 For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. 16 Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. 17 If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. 32 If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. 33 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.' 34 I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. 35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

MESSAGE

It was on this night long ago that Jesus gave the great commandment to his disciples - that as he had served them, so too should they serve others; that as he had loved them, so too should they love others.

It was also on this night that Jesus instituted the Eucharist – the Lord's supper - which is the central sustaining sacrament of our faith.

One could say that on this night when Jesus faced his betrayal and death that he established his church.

Certainly after his resurrection he gave his great commission that his church was to be a witness to the world, but tonight marks his great commandment: to love one another, serve one another, and remember him in our common meal.

Of course this week when we think of Christ's church it's hard not to think of the fire at Notre Dame earlier this week. Much can be said, and already has been said, about the amount of money that has been amassed for the rebuilding effort – already over a billion dollars has been raised.

Many people think that money could better be spent feeding the poor, and that may be true. That's not our topic for tonight.

Regardless of what we think of the money gathered to rebuild, the fact remains that this outpouring of money demonstrates the importance that people place upon such buildings – even in a country that defines itself by its fierce secularism.

The French revolution was fought with the express purpose of abolishing the power of the monarchy and of the church, and yet when this symbol of God's presence in the heart of Paris was threatened the President vowed without hesitation that it would be restored to its former glory. Why?

It's because the church represents something greater than herself. Notre Dame is not just a pile of bricks, beautiful as it may be, but a signpost that points to something else.

The church has been charged with being a witness in the world – and in many ways the church accomplishes that by being a visual representation of God's kingdom.

The high ceilings and soaring arches shrink us down and remind us that we are not nearly as grand as we would like to believe. Stained glass and statues remind us of important people and key events that reveal something of God's nature to us.

The placement of the Bible, the pulpit, the communion table, the baptismal font – all of these things are communicating something to us about our God and our faith.

The church is sacramental – it tries to translate the spiritual into something physical – something that we can tangibly sense through sight, touch, hearing, smell, and taste.

Jesus himself was sacramental – he was the Spirit of God come to earth in a physical form that human beings to relate to. As the present body of Jesus we continue that role – to be the physical manifestation of the divine presence on earth.

Tonight's worship service reflects this physical manifestation – what we call sacraments. The splash of cool water, the light of the Christ candle. The sounds of our voices raised in praise, the tang of the wine, the yeasty savouring of the bread. The warm cheesy smell of feet.

Yes. The smell of feet. The focus of the scripture for Maundy Thursday is Jesus washing the feet of those gathered at the table.

Something new stood out to me this time around when reading the text – the timing. Normally traveler's feet would be washed as they were welcomed into a home. The foot washing would take place right away. Certainly it should happen before dinner – just as we would wash our hands before coming to the table the Jews of Jesus time had similar habits.

But that didn't happen this time. During dinner Jesus got up from the table and moved among the guests washing their feet. Afterwards he sat back down and they continued with their meal. It seems an odd thing to do in the middle of eating.

The only thing that makes sense to me is that somebody had some particularly rank feet – bad enough that it was affecting people's enjoyment of their food. Bad enough to make Jesus think 'We can't just keep pretending this isn't happening; I've got to do something about this.'

At first this might seem a little irreverent – maybe a little sacrilegious - but as I meditated upon this thought it seemed to me that, just like a good sacrament should, Jesus getting up from the table to deal with people's smelly feet reveals something about the nature of God.

What it says to me is that God is not only found in the beautiful and glorious things of this world, but also in the mundane. The God of glory is glimpsed in grand architecture and the expanse of the heavens – the God of love and compassion can also be found covered in mud and sweat.

Jesus is not scared off by our dirtier aspects. And he doesn't practice that false politeness in which we pretend that we don't notice things. He actually comes right up to us and says 'You're a little gross. But here, let me help you.'

This is our great hope. It means that we don't have to clean ourselves up before we come to God. We don't need fancy clothes, we don't need to sort out our lives so that God will be impressed and receive us. We can approach God looking like this....(strip off robe) And we can also approach God looking like this.

The important thing is that we get to the table. That's it. That is the message of Maundy Thursday. We simply come before God, and the God who washes dirty feet will take care of us. He will do what we are unable to do on our own.

That means that your place is here. Every one of you. This is exactly where you need to be. Even though we may be offensive to other people, our presence may ruin their comfortable meals, Jesus won't let that stand for long.

Through his loving ministrations we will become clean and presentable – to each other, but more importantly, presentable to God.

So, that is what we are going to do tonight. We're going to get ourselves to the table, and we'll let Jesus do the rest.

Let's sing 'A new commandment' (225) and have our elders come to the front while we're singing and we'll set the table and prepare for Jesus' presence among us.

Amen.