

Sermon for Maundy Thursday, 13<sup>th</sup> April 2017 by Geoffrey Howard

I imagine that those of you who are going to take part in the foot-washing will, like me, have already given their feet a good scrub, perhaps sprinkled some talcum powder on them or even treated them to a dab of eau de Cologne, you will have cut your toe nails and made sure there are no holes in your socks. This evening the last thing you want is for anyone to see that your feet need washing. When I say that this is a far cry from the first Maundy Thursday, indeed a sanitised version of it, you must not think I am disparaging what we are doing tonight. I value this ritual for the glimpse it gives us into the very heart of God himself and I find it deeply moving to reenact the scene in the Upper Room.

Nevertheless it is a pale version of what the first disciples experienced; there would have been no holes in their socks, for they wouldn't be wearing any, and their bare feet would not have been protected by substantial shoes but by open sandals. The streets through which they made their way to the Upper Room would not have been decorated with warnings against litter louts and exhortations to carry a plastic bag to clean up after your dog. Nor would you have seen those streets being regularly sprayed with water before receiving a thorough brushing. Palestinian streets in our Lord's day were malodorous, as indeed were European streets till well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century; goats, sheep, oxen, camels and pariah dogs would all leave unpleasant evidence of their presence. And the sandalled feet which splashed through the mess would be as malodorous as the streets themselves. The lowly slaves whose task it was to wash such feet must have been experts at averting their eyes and holding their breath whilst going about their degrading task.

It was this which Jesus, their host, took upon himself and by doing so horrified and embarrassed his disciples. What St John records in prose was expressed by St Paul in poetry: *Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus; who being in the form of God thought it not robbery to be equal with God; but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant (doulos, slave)*. What we see tonight is the culmination of that divine self-emptying which on the morrow would become a lifeless, bedraggled, scarecrow placarded against a pitiless sky.

What Jesus did on Maundy Thursday was a symbolic act designed to dramatically convey to the disciples and to all who follow in their footsteps that greatness in the kingdom of heaven is not achieved by standing on one's dignity, but by serving others, even if that service may be demeaning.

But, as often in John's gospel, there is another message below the surface. I think Peter caught a glimpse of this when he protested, *Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head*. I imagine he had a moment of insight and realised that something even more profound was going on. And this reading seems to be confirmed by Jesus' response, *One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean*. This must be a reference to the cleansing waters of baptism and the continual daily cleansing we need following our initial commitment, not an external cleansing but an internal one. So it is irrelevant tonight that our feet are already clean, our toe nails trimmed and our socks in one piece. For what it is all about is not a cleansing of the feet but of the heart. And we are all in need of that. On Maundy Thursday, together with our immaculate feet, we bring our soiled hearts and say with the Psalmist, *Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity and cleanse me from my sin; purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean, wash me and I shall be whiter than snow; create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me*.

One last thought: In the Somerset town of Taunton there are in St George's Roman Catholic church Stations of the Cross carved out of wood by a distinguished local sculptor. The sculptor whom I met on the same day I visited the church told me that he had made them shortly after the death of his much loved father and he had poured his grief into them. They are extraordinarily moving. One in particular touched a tender spot. It is where Jesus stumbles under the weight he is carrying, he is on one knee and the sole of his right foot is exposed, on it there is small incision caused by a sharp stone. The sufferings of the floggings, the crown of thorns and the crucifixion elude me, my imagination simply cannot encompass them. But I know what it is to tread on a sharp stone in my bare feet. On his way to

the place of crucifixion, stumbling over the rubbish tip of Golgotha, Jesus must have trodden on many sharp stones and his feet must have been in a dreadful state, but at the journey's end there was no cooling water, no tender hands, no soap, no towel to wash away the blood and the dirt from the feet of him who had washed the feet of others.

On Maundy Thursday let us take off our shoes for we stand on Holy Ground.