

Maundy Thursday – 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35

God Who Serves

Feet are basic things. They get us from here to there, and in the process become calloused, sore, and sweaty. The disciples were waiting for the household servant to offer them the usual courtesy of a cool bath for their feet before the meal began. When no servant appeared, Jesus, the Word made flesh, took on that role. The hands of the one who came from God, who was God, tended to their tired, dirty, smelly feet.

This night Jesus revealed the love that's at the heart of God – a love that serves in the most mundane ways, because it's of God's nature to serve, to give, to share in the ordinariness of our lives. Here we are in that Upper Room. Here Jesus would wash our feet. He invites us to know God who is always ministering to our needs – giving us breath and bread, light and warmth. God is the giver of all gifts, and in receiving these gifts we receive something of God's self.

To see Jesus taking the towel and washing the disciples feet, is to see the Servant God. Unless we experience Jesus as God who serves, 'you have' Jesus said, 'no share with me.' We need to see God as one who, in Jesus, would wash our feet, for this is how God acts. It's a caring that we receive, but it's also a caring that we're called to share with others.

Service is something that's often shown in the simplest and humblest actions. What's usually asked of us isn't grand gestures or magnificent acts of self-sacrifice, but simple, mundane service. Of course, we can deceive ourselves. We can use doing the menial tasks as a way of avoiding the real ministries that God has called us to. We can also use them as a way of showing how humble we are, so that we can be proud of being humble. But the point is, servanthood leads us to look away from ourselves to the world about us – the world we've been called to serve with self-giving love.

John's description of the Last Supper doesn't include the institution of the Eucharist as told in the other three Gospels and by Paul. But the heart of what John shares is the same as the other Gospel writers. Washing feet and breaking bread both speak of the same reality. They both say to us, that in Jesus, 'the bread of life,' God is giving of God's self to us. 'Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.' Paul's account of the institution of the Last Supper describes how, week-by-week, we receive the life and love of God through the body and blood of Jesus. As Jesus breaks the bread and shares the cup, he says to us, 'This is me, given for you.' It's the same story as the washing of feet. It's the story of God's self-giving – of how God cares for us by gifting us with the divine life. To touch the bread, to be aware of it becoming part of us as we eat it, to taste the wine in our mouths – entering us and becoming part of us – is an empowering thing. It's nothing less than the gift of God's serving love. God is feeding us, enabling us, to serve and care as God serves and cares for us.

A priest tells this story. 'Some years ago, I was involved in teaching mentally disabled adults. One particular man had the most tremendous stomach upset one day. He was in a bad way. Fortunately, there were showers on site, and I took him to them. I wanted to help him as much as I could, so I ran the water to the right temperature, got the soap and towels ready, and knocked on the changing room door. 'Are you ready?' I called. There was a grunt. I called again but there was no appearance. Eventually I went in and there he was, just as I had left him, fully clothed and reeking. I realised he was frightened, feeling embarrassed and deeply upset. To cut a long story short, we both got in the shower, and I cleaned him up. I can't say I enjoyed it at all, but I shall always remember him.'

Jesus took the form of a servant and, so to speak, gets in the shower with us. Such is our calling.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form, he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross.

Alister Hendery – Hastings, 2023