

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Michael Anderson Bullock, Rector
Maundy Thursday (24 March 2005)
St. Martin's-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church, Columbia, South Carolina,*

The elements that comprise Holy Week – from Palm Sunday through Easter Sunday – are the dramatic events that speak to our faith and to our hope as Christians. As I said at the start of our participation last Sunday, Holy Week is prime time. Holy Week is the dramatic crescendo for people who keep covenant with God because in Jesus' passion, crucifixion, and resurrection the entire universe can see the awesome nature of God and, consequently, what is really real.

One way of looking at all this is to use the liturgical year's rhythms, where the creative Word of God becomes flesh and dwells among us full of grace and truth: Incarnation. That enfleshed, divine Word manifests itself in the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth, who burns to reveal a bright light shining among the shadows: Epiphany. And then what that light reveals takes shape in terms of Jesus' steady approach to the cross.

And here we are. If God's Word has come among us, on our terms, in our lives, then God's love will have to be tested on the hard wood of the cross. Death, itself, will have to have its way with God's Christ in order for the truth to be seen and received and embraced –by us. And that, I would suggest, is the power and surprise and relief of Easter. But I get ahead of myself.

This entire drama of our salvation is encapsulated and presented to us in this week we call holy. Holy Week. It is "holy" because it is of God, about God; and the ultimate call of this week is for us to be drawn to God, to God's heart, to God's life, to God's presence, where we may see and hear and touch and taste and smell what is really real: namely, that with God there is life beyond fear and death. And we are given this life – now – in the crucified and risen One: Jesus.

It is telling that tonight we gather on what is known as "Maundy Thursday." "Maundy" comes from the Latin term for "mandatory." And it is Jesus, himself, who gathers his followers on this portentous night and gives them an over-arching charge: "Do this, in memory of me." Consequently, from the earliest days in the Christian experience, Maundy Thursday has inaugurated what is called the "Triduum:" "the Sacred Three Days." In a week that is called holy, the next three days are the climax our salvation, the climax of the entire year. It is mandatory, therefore, for those of us who claim Jesus as our own to "do this."

It is mandatory, not because Jesus is bossing us around like some bullying big brother with a messiah complex. No, it is "mandatory" because if we miss this "Triduum," we miss seeing what God is truly like and what life with God is truly like. We miss experiencing and being reminded of God's reality, which is a reality that does nothing less than redeem us and free us from all distortion and fear.

“Do this in remembrance of me.” All right then: What is it that we do this night? What specifically are we to experience and repeat consistently that is so crucial? And what does this mandated activity all mean? Moreover, what difference will all this make?

In response to these questions, I want to pay attention to the liturgical actions that go to make this night distinct and see in them powerful answers. But before I do this, I also want to challenge each of you to reflect upon these questions and what this night has to do with your life and with your faith. How does the full drama that surrounds the Last Supper touch you and shape who you are and what you do? What is it about this night’s experience that makes God and life with God’s Christ real and worth remembering?

For my part, it does not take an expert to note that at the core of this night’s observance lies the Lord’s Supper. Conveying the primary words of St. Paul, our Prayer Book tradition puts it cleanly and clearly every time this sacred meal is commemorated: “For in the night in which he was betrayed...” “On the night he was handed over to suffering and death, our Lord Jesus Christ took bread...took the cup of wine; and when he had given thanks, he gave it to his disciples, and said ... this is my body...this is my blood...do this for the remembrance of me.”

Reflection on this part of the mandate, alone, would fill a year’s time and energy. (And, I would quickly add, it would be time and energy very well-spent.) For a community in which the Eucharist is celebrated at least four times a week, what does it mean to us? What impact does it have on our lives? What difference does it make to be in Communion with the Lord of life?

The gospel for Maundy Thursday always comes from St. John’s gospel, and as any good Bible study will make clear to any of us, John’s gospel is distinctly different from those of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which, in turn, are a bit different from one another. This point, as it relates to Maundy Thursday in particular, is telling in that St. John does not describe what we know as the Last Supper. It isn’t there, and you can look it up.

The thirteenth chapter is the place, and this is what John says. Verse one says this: “Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.” Verse two says this: “And during supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon’s son, to betray him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper, laid aside his garments, and girded himself with a towel.”

Interesting, yes? No mention of any detail of this meal: no mention of bread or wine; no words of institution (This is my body...this is my blood). Just three words that indicate that the disciples were gathered with Jesus for supper and that (in John’s eyes) the highlight of that supper turns out to be what Jesus did immediately afterward. What’s this about?

One of the members of our Tuesday Morning Prayer and Study Group recently asked me when the celebration of the Eucharist, Holy Communion, became so central for the Christian community. My answer was “right away,” and some of the evidence for this answer lies implicitly in this gospel reading from John and goes to the point of why the Fourth gospel omits mentioning the Last Supper.

It’s not that John and his community of fledgling Christians were black-hearted “low churchmen” who ignored things sacramental – far from it. It’s just that by the end of the first century (when John’s gospel was written) the centrality of Holy Communion in the worship life of the emerging church was a given, so much so that John could assume that everyone knew what Jesus and the Twelve were doing at “supper,” to the extent that John’s emphasis could address not the practice of the Supper but its meaning and consequence. And this is precisely what he does and the reason, I suggest, that the gospel for Maundy Thursday is always what we have heard tonight.

“[Jesus] rose from supper, laid aside his garments, and girded himself with a towel. Then he poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples’ feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which he was girded.”

I remember my homiletics professor from seminary, a lawyer by training and, in my estimation, a profoundly important teacher – I remember him making a comment about the Maundy Thursday footwashing. When I eagerly described to him the liturgical plans that we were making for that year’s celebration, hoping so much for his approval and encouragement, he burst my balloon by saying: “My, aren’t we getting Rome-ish!”

Aside from this being an uncharacteristically narrow comment from this teacher, it also points out how we tend to miss St. John’s point about Maundy Thursday. He is not presenting an “either/or” situation: either the sacrament or the service; either high church or low church; either good liturgy or good outreach. No, aware reading will note that John is teaching his community, perhaps addressing what many of us need to address: that the familiarity of the sacrament also needs to be reconnected with the way we live and move and have our being. It is not about Sunday worship being separate from Monday’s practicality. It is not about going to church and taking part in the Eucharist so that we can be fed and feel better, in hopes that we don’t run out of gas before the next fill-up. No, John’s expression is filled with his desire to have his community – and our community – see that breaking bread and drinking wine with Christ is not just another meal. It is Communion – with the Lord of life; and as such life, itself, has changed. And because life, itself, has changed, we are to leave the table both changed and as change agents. Hence the footwashing.

In a nutshell, the footwashing entails how we are called to be living sacraments outside the doors of this sacred space. If we take to heart St. Paul’s strong admonishment to the church in Corinth (what we heard in this evening’s epistle reading), then we realize that what we have fed upon is Jesus, Lord and Savior. And daring to remember that we are what we eat, then we are to go forth into the world, filled with Christ’s life (his blood) and as living members of his Body.

“Do this in remembrance of me.”

You will forgive me for running long, but we all have so much to remember, and it is all so important, so daring, so heart-wrenching, that even to begin to forget a small part of this night tears away our life, our legacy, our joy. So, one last word about feet, as the arena to which you and I are called to bring Christ.

The word “liturgy” means “the work of the people.” It is holy and vital work to come to Christ’s table. It is holy and vital work to come to this sacred table and to receive what we need and cannot give to ourselves. It is holy and vital work to pay attention and to take into our hearts and to honor in our minds what is given at this Table. And it is holy and vital work not to forget that the gift is given so that we may give it to those we meet in the world.

Feet. The footwashing. Communion in action, one might say. Washing feet speaks to living a sacramental life. Washing feet calls us to remember that we have been made God’s royalty in baptism, but this dignified and knowing royalty serves. The kings and queens of God touch the world at its deepest need, at its most tender place, at its greatest pain.

Feet take a beating, don’t they? They bear the weight of our lives. “Oh my aching feet!”

Very few of us are proud of the way our feet look, as a result. To expose them is to expose our imperfection, our burden, our neediness. Feet are also a very intimate and vulnerable part of the human body. All the nerve endings are there, which is the reason that a good foot massage is so wonderful. It is also the reason that sadistic torturers slap the feet in order to gain control over their victims.

Feet also mean that we are dealing with bodies, real bodies, real people, real lives and not concepts. Feet are ordinary, mundane, and necessary; and this is where God’s Communion-life must be brought, proclaimed, and administered.

So, we do this, too, in remembrance of the One whose Body and Blood have changed us. It is mandatory – that is, it is so vitally important – to do this and to remember it all. Amen.