

Maundy Thursday – April 9, 2020 Cycle A

While Jesus' actions on Maundy Thursday might surprise, even shock us, his kneeling down to wash the disciples' feet absolutely scandalized his disciples. We can hear this in Peter's voice, "You will never wash my feet"! In no way does Peter feel worthy of such "service" – the duty of the "lowest" servant of the house. For Jesus to willingly take on this task shocked Peter. He was used to seeing Jesus do amazing, incredible feats far beyond the ability of anyone else: healing the sick, curing blindness, healing the lame, cleansing lepers, stilling the wind and waves with a word, ... raising people from the dead! While he had at times been confused by Jesus' teachings and actions, Peter was completely unprepared for this – Jesus "humbling himself" to serve him! What was it all about?

As always, Jesus was teaching – illuminating the truth through his words and by his actions. While others ran from lepers, or forced them to call out warning when inadvertently approached, Jesus reached out to touch those with the dreaded disease! No one was so "unclean" in Jesus' eyes as to be beyond compassion, certainly not by any outward infirmity. Neither was anyone so "unclean" as to be beyond God's love and redemption. Jesus showed this, not only by touching "lepers", he proved it by healing them – and many others "deemed" beyond hope by the world. On one occasion, encountering a man "born blind", the disciples asked Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" To them being blind from birth implied some sort of terrible "uncleanness", some sin so dark that it merited an irreversible "curse". By his actions, Jesus showed his disciples that not only were they wrong about the man, but that it was they who were blind and needed their eyes opened! The man was not "cursed from birth". Instead, Jesus' healing of his blindness became an opportunity to enlighten everyone, to demonstrate how wrong our judgements of other people were and are. God is not the "author" of hopeless situations; we are, through our actions and attitudes! The real problem is that we are blind to the consequences of our choices. Of this we need to be cleansed, healed. And so, Jesus came into the world...

Teaching, Jesus knelt to wash his disciples' feet. It was shocking, borderline scandalous! That's certainly how the disciples reacted. Ironic then, to remember that for generations people had looked, hoped, and prayed for the Messiah "to be born" among them. To us, Christmas is a day of joyous celebration – God's Son, the Savior of the world, being born! But if you step back for a moment and think about the truth, what was actually involved, it's not hard to see that coming into our world was an enormous "step down"! Paul put it this way, "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 humiled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross." (Philippians 2:5b-8) We don't typically think of Christmas that way, as God "humbling" God's Own Self. But what could be more "humbling" than to lay down everything and become a helpless and defenseless infant? Who among us would choose that? Yet, God did so willingly. Why?

The short answer is love. “God loved the world so much.” The long answer is that we need God’s love – desperately! Blind, overwhelmed by sin and misery, human beings were and are “at each other’s throats”, utterly lost and yet totally ignorant of the fact. Out of love, Christ Jesus “humbled himself” to open our eyes to the truth, offer us forgiveness, and show us the way to life! As Jesus said plainly, “the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Kneeling down, then, to wash his disciples’ feet isn’t by comparison so much at all. It shocks us, because while we can imagine doing something “heroic” for someone else, we’re far less willing to be humble: to act not for praise and adulation, but simply for the good of another – even someone who does not deserve or desire our help.

If you read John’s account of Maundy Thursday carefully, it’s apparent that Judas’ feet were among those Jesus washed! Judas already had it in his heart to betray Jesus – and Jesus knew it! To us this adds another level of shock – not only that Jesus humbled himself before one who was about to betray him, but calls us to be willing to do the same... “So if I, your teacher and Lord have washed your feet, you also should do as I have done to you.” (John 13:15) We are to love, even our enemies, even to washing their feet! Shocking, is it not? But it shouldn’t be. Jesus “humbled himself” to an extent far greater than we can imagine! The Son of God was willing to wash Judas’ feet – to cleanse him! It is why Jesus came into the world, to cleanse us all – even though we do not deserve it. It is as Paul said, “God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8)! Christ died, even for Judas... who if he had asked would have been forgiven! How can I make such a claim? Because it is God’s Nature, revealed for all to see in Jesus Christ! He came to reveal the truth of our enslavement to sin and free us from it. Unfortunately, many choose to keep the shackles on anyway. It is a terrible tragedy, that so many choose to remain blind to the truth.

The depth of God’s love shocks and scandalizes us! To cope, we mostly choose to not see or acknowledge the truth: the universe around us, tainted by sin as it is, is nonetheless filled with God’s love! If it were not so, the world would have become utterly cold, dark, and without life long ago. To wake us, Jesus needed to shock our senses, to reveal the depth of God’s love. Therefore, he came into the world, walked among us in patience, healed all who did not refuse help, took on the least desired duties, and ultimately gave his life on the cross. Christ Jesus humbly did all these things for one reason: “God so loved the world that He gave his only Son” to cleanse and redeem it. Our mandate is to be part of this redemption, to be willing to humble ourselves, to love and serve one another, as Christ commanded. For it is by our love that the world will know that we are, in fact, Jesus’ disciples. Amen