Maundy Thursday Eucharist

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**Reflection on John 13:1-15**

**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,[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+13&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-26624a)] 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,[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+13&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-26630b)] but is entirely clean. And you[[c](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+13&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-26630c)] 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.

As human beings, memories are important. Often, when our grandparents or parents relate their memories of times past, they clearly remember the events and characters that have been central to their journey of life. Often these memories are inspirational. We, too, remember those events that have been key to shaping our own life journey to this point in time: these memories are sacred and they are a reminder of who we are, and where we have come from. From my own perspective, I can remember some of my teachers and friends from school, my first day at university, and my first years as a teacher. I can remember the death of my grandparents, my mother, my siblings’ weddings, and the birth of their children. Memories can be both joyful and painful, but they are part and parcel of my story. As a community, we, also, share memories, and there are events that trigger memories in our common history as a people. Personally, I can still remember the day that human kind first walked in the moon, being the recipient of a hand-held calculator, the first computer and the size and heaviness of the first mobile phones. I can remember the deaths of students, and I can remember the many joyous times that I have celebrated with friends and acquaintances in my journey of life. On a global scene, I can remember the tragedy of the Munich Olympics, the graphics of the Rwanda genocide, the images of the war from the conflict in Bosnia-Serbia, where I was on the day of 9/11, or waking up to find that the Boxing Day tsunamis of 2004 had taken just over one quarter of a million lives. Memories are an essential and integral part of our personal and communal history.

As human beings, we should not forget our history. For thousands of years the way that human beings have remembered something vitally important was to create a story or a ritual for it and then pass it down through some form of tradition, year after year. As a community and as nations it is important that we want to remember events that we believe are central to our identity. Most of us would celebrate our National Day, but even this can be a source of tension. In Australia, our National Day is when the Europeans first settled, but for the Indigenous peoples of our land this is a painful memory, since for them, it is a reminder of their loss of freedom. Similarly, we remember in Australia our first involvement in World War I, where we lost so many young men to a battle for from home. Yet, in that tragedy, we celebrate something important, the memory that these lives have been sacrificed for our freedom. In Europe, I note that November 11, is Armistice Day, the end of the great War. It is a reminder of the value of fighting for peace, as there are no winners in war, only innocent victims to the crazy political ideology of the ruling power who wish to impose on others what they believe the world should be. Yet, in our present time, the memory of that Great War or that of the Holocaust from World War II, is just that a memory: again, human beings are seeing that peace has to be protected, or else it will become that: just a memory.

In our Christian history, two thousand years ago, Jesus went to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, a ritual that for the Jewish people was already 1500 years old back then. Yet, at that last meal, as Jesus remembered, Jesus gave a new meaning and new significance to that Passover ritual. As we hear from our first reading tonight, Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, Jesus instituted, within the context of the Passover, a Eucharistic meal with the words that we all know so well “this is my body,” “this is my blood,” “do this in remembrance of me.” Paul’s letter is actually the earliest written record we have of the Last Supper. This event is captured not just by Paul, but by the three Synoptic Gospels as well.

However, the Gospel we read tonight, John’s Gospel, is different. For John, this event is not a Passover Meal, as for this Evangelist, Jesus is the Lamb of God who will take away the sins of the world (Jn 1:29). In his “memory”, Jesus is killed at the same time as the Passover Lambs are being slaughtered in the Temple. Accordingly, John’s emphasis is no longer the meal as Eucharist. John, within the context of the Exodus motif has placed this more common memory of the Eucharist in the Bread of Life Discourse in Chapter 6. John’s Gospel was written probably 40+ years after Paul’s letter and 60+ years after the event took place. By that point in time, it’s very likely that the ritual of celebrating the Eucharistic meal was already well established within the early Christian church. So, maybe, the writer of John saw that Christians were already remembering the Eucharistic meal and the Evangelist wanted to make sure that as Christians there was something else just as important that we didn’t miss. What was that something else? The washing of the feet.

What is so special about the washing of the feet that John would choose to include this ritual in his Gospel and not the Eucharistic meal? Well, let’s go back 2000 years to Palestine and think about what life was like. Most of the people in Palestine, certainly all of the poor people, walked around barefoot. If you had shoes, they were flimsy sandals. You walked everywhere, on dirty roads following even dirtier animals. So, when you went into someone’s house, you had to wash your feet. Back then, when you sat down to eat, you were not sitting in a chair at a table, or in your own bed, you were eating on the or sharing a bed with someone’s feet right next to you. So, I am sure you would appreciate it if their feet were washed. As a young boy growing up in outback Australia, we often played in bare feet. Often, my Mum’s first words when we came in from playing were often Wash your Feet before you come back inside! In well-to-do households in Palestine, the washing of feet would be done by a servant or a slave. In less well-to-do houses, by a younger member of the family, or perhaps by one of the women serving the meal. It was never done by the guest of honour, by the rabbi, by the master. However, on this night, John points out it was very different. Jesus wrapped a towel around himself, grabbed a basin, and then got down on his knees and started washing the feet of his apostles.

Jesus was demonstrating that to love as he loves, to follow him, you must be willing to serve, to be prepared to do even the most menial of tasks. First-time parents, are confronted with this reality with the arrival of their first child who requires that they step up to the plate and perform many of the most menial tasks. Nurses, in aged care facilities, and those who look after the severely sick, or the most challenged of children, confront this task every day. Jesus is reminding us that as true Christians we should remember that in the kingdom of heaven there is no job too small, too menial, “beneath you.” To follow Jesus means to live a life of service. And so, John is reminding us that the Eucharist is not just about sharing a sacred meal, there is another just as important dimension. Eucharist is about appreciating that there is a sacredness in even the most menial of task, the washing of another’s feet, there is a sacredness and an innate value in the life of every human being. Whatever our role in society it is a reminder that we need to honour and respect all those people who do the difficult and dirty jobs within our society. Jesus knew that he could not do his mission alone, he was reaching out to those who had helped him with the mission God has entrusted him to do, and he was showing that he appreciated them for who they were as people. Jesus is showing us, and John is reminding us, that we are all interconnected, by a love and mutual respect that, each of us, in our own unique way contribute to the building up of God’s Kingdom.

We do not come across many foot washers these days – but where would we be as a society without the janitors, the dishwashers, the farm workers, the trash collectors, the street cleaners, the tradespeople, the health care workers, the maids and cleaners. We may not leave this celebration of our eucharist tonight and become one of them tomorrow – but there is no reason we can’t recognise the truly sacred thing task that they do on our behalf. They are down on the knees every day on our behalf. There are no small jobs in the Kingdom of Heaven.

As such, John’s Gospel reminds us that the Eucharist was not given to us to stand on its own. The Eucharist is a reminder that, through it, God abides in us and we abide in God. What we do is sacred. God is present and active in the ordinariness of our lives. When we celebrate the eucharist we remember Jesus’ life and mission of sharing his love with those closest of friends and family. When we receive communion, we remember God’s love for us. Similarly, John is reminding us that when we get down and wash our neighbour’s feet, we share our life and love with our neighbour; we need to share both love and forgiveness from, and to, each other.

In the foot-washing, Jesus breaks an overly solemn image of God, as one who is powerful or to be feared. God is on his knees reaching out to share with us the wonder of our lives in all their beauty and brokenness. The foot-washing reminds us that it is no longer a question of living on our knees before a God who dominates us from above, but to allow ourselves be touched by the "Most High who makes himself the Very Low”.

So, for John, as important as the Eucharist is, it is not simply a private act of devotion meant to square our debts with God. It is a call to action. We are the body of Christ, his hands, his feet, his arms, his face, his heart. After we have been fed our spiritual food at the eucharistic table, it is time to stand up from the table (or the altar) and walk out into the kingdom and ensure that we are busy, busy with the work of living as Christ commands us.  Whatever that work is, healing, helping, hiring, teaching, listening, loving, creating or inventing it is sacred work. We must not forget that the Eucharist is not complete, without the washing of the feet. For John, the foot-washing becomes a σημεῖον, of Jesus’ love, and its manifestation is the only way to sustain the abundant life that Jesus brings into the world (Jn 10:10). It is only by actualising Jesus’ example (ὑπόδειγμα) in the life and structure of the community, and in the everyday life of each disciple, that the community and the disciples can be called real followers of Christ. In John’s Gospel, the symbol of community is a foot-basin, a towel, a pitcher of water, and caring hands. It is here that the dream of Jesus comes true: where the power of the Kingdom of God can break through the barriers of preconceived ideas, expectations, uncertainty, and failed examples of true leadership. The eucharist is an essential part of our life as Christ-followers. However, eucharist is not complete unless we see the sacredness in even the most menial of tasks; it is there, that for John, the Gospel truly comes alive and becomes a witness to the events of Easter. It is this we are called to remember and to celebrate. It is only through recognising the sacred in the humblest of actions, in our interconnectedness to our world, both its people and its resources, that we can truly come to see that we can rise again. Memories become real when they remind us of their power. Service becomes real when we see in the most vulnerable of others the image of God, peace only becomes real when we see the reality of war and its futility. Resurrection becomes real only when we confront death. The Footwashing is a memory, but a powerful memory that will only become real when we see and accept that it is a truly loving God who has lowered God’s self to be on our side. It is a reminder of our fragility, yet a promise of its power and majesty to transform those whom we meet by our call to service and witness to that love of God who reaches out to us with caring hands, a gentle touch, and a compassionate heart.