

The Basin and the Towel

Maundy Thursday

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While at St James, I sat with the Valley 2 youth group in the lead up to Easter. When asked to retell the story of Easter, these teenagers produced the script from the Life of Brian rather than the passion narrative, they were able to say that Jesus had died and rose again, the events of his Passion were quite beyond them. This story, which was part of my cultural heritage, had passed from the culture in under a generation. It was a sharp reminder that as the church we are now functioning within a pagan world and that we are always one generation away from extinction. For this reason, it is important that we remember these events corporately. That we retell the story of the passion to the world

Tonight, we begin our Easter observances. For many of us, it is not the first time, and nor will it be the last, and we may be tempted to allow these events to become routine. One of the joys of having young children is the opportunity to experience these events afresh with their eyes, as they discover Easter, and in our own way to rediscover it anew. But we need not rely on children for this. We ourselves can approach Easter with a new vision, if we allow ourselves to be caught up into these events and allow the Holy Spirit to renew our experience. Then this Easter can become new again for us. So let's begin....

Tonight, we commence in the Upper Room. Our readings this evening start with the Old Testament account of the Exodus and the Passover, the meal that Jesus shared with his disciples. This special meal marked the calling of the nation and set them apart as the people of God. It was at this meal, that Jesus took bread and wine. Setting them apart, he declared them as a memorial of the events that would follow. As the Passover was the meal that marked the Jews and retold God's deliverance from the Egyptians, so the meal that the disciples shared with Jesus became the mark of the Christians and retells our deliverance from the power of sin.

Bread and wine were to become the symbols of his Body and Blood and as we share them, we share him and the new life given to us.

But in the Upper Room, Jesus gave us another sign. The Gospel reading records a dramatic demonstration of the meaning of being a follower of Jesus. Jesus got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. 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. Rather than describe to them the type of service required' he showed them. In the simple act of taking a basin and towel, Jesus challenged the disciples' perception of themselves and of what it meant to become citizens of the Kingdom.

In Jesus time, the job of washing the feet of guests was considered one of the most distasteful in the household, and belonged to the lowest servant or slave. It was such a distasteful job, that even the disciples of a teacher were never expected to perform it. I have puzzled over it, and I find it difficult to identify a job with as much stigma in our own society. It would have to be something that was considered beneath

human dignity. The washing of feet was one of the lowest and most demeaning jobs that could be done in Jesus' society.

It is easy to sanitise this act. Tomorrow, we will hear in the news services of the Pope washing the feet of the poor at the Vatican as part of their Easter celebrations. But when we tie this action into a ritual, we have the tendency to neutralise its effect. Tonight's Gospel reminds you and I, that on the same night that Jesus took bread and wine and asked us to continue to do this in remembrance of him, he also took a towel and a basin and told his disciples to do likewise.

To do likewise today is not easy. There is no necessity to literally wash the feet of others in our culture. But we can follow Jesus lead when we allow ourselves to serve another. As followers of Jesus, there is no task that is beneath us if it means that we can serve one another. The challenge for me and for you is to make this servanthood a living reality in our lives. Often it is easy to 'Serve the Lord' and set out to do great things for him. To be caught up in programmes and events and in the building of great monuments but it is not easy to risk serving others: to assume the mantle of humility. This is the quiet witness of the Mother Theresa in the world. Those for whom serving their Lord is lived out in the serving of the least in this world.

For me, this type of service is still to become a complete reality. As a Deacon, I wore my stole as a reminder of this commitment. On the deacon, it hangs at my right hand, ready to dry the feet that I have washed. Yet it is easy to allow the stole to become decoration. I must also take up the basin, and kneel to wash feet. Jesus not only washed their feet but foreshadowed an even greater service. Within twenty-four hours he had given his life for them and for us. As we revisit the events of Easter, we have the opportunity to review and renew our commitment to serving the Lord.

When Jesus took a basin of water and tied a towel around his waist he demonstrated to us how we should serve in his church. Tonight, as we reach out our hands to receive the bread and the cup, are we also prepared to take up the towel and the basin? As we recall, his death and passion' are we prepared to offer our lives for the sake of his kingdom? Jesus said: "if I your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet; you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set before you an example that you also should do as I have done to you." Will you join with me in this challenge?

AMEN