

**“Utter Despair”**  
**Maundy Thursday**  
**March 20, 2008**

Texts: Psalm 78:14-25, *BCP 696* / Exodus 12:1-14a / 1 Corinthians 11:23-32  
/ John 13:1-15

**John 13:1-15**

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. **2** During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, **3** Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, **4** rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. **5** Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him. **6** He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, do you wash my feet?” **7** Jesus answered him, “What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand.” **8** Peter said to him, “You shall never wash my feet.” Jesus answered him, “If I do not 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, “The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not every one of you.” **11** For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, “Not all of you are clean.”

**12** When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, “Do you understand what I have done to you? **13** You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. **14** If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. **15** For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you.

Have you ever had your feet washed by somebody else? Where they took a basin of water, knelt at your feet and proceeded to put their hands in the water with your feet and wash your feet with their bare hands? It is a humbling experience not only for the one who is washing your feet, but also for the who is having her or his feet washed. And it's very hard to be angry with someone who washes your feet. There is a bond of humility that is very difficult to break.

I remember the first time I ever went to a Promise Keepers event in Knoxville, TN. Many of you may remember that Promise Keepers is the men's stadium events that were especially popular in the 1990s – thousands of men came together to learn

more about Jesus Christ and to rededicate themselves to serving their wives. There was a lot of bad press about Promise Keepers and about how they were a bunch of male chauvinists, etc., but that is far from the truth.

At the end of our event where over 40,000 men had gathered, we were challenged by one of the speakers to go home and wash our wives feet. That night, after we had put the kids to bed, I sat Beth down on the couch, drew a basin of warm water from the sink and proceeded to wash her feet. She was overcome...I could tell it was very uncomfortable for her, watching me beneath her performing a task that could easily be seen as demeaning. But, it was humbling for both of us. I wanted to show her that I loved her and that I would do anything in my power to show that love and that I wanted only to serve her.

And that is Jesus's point when he washes the disciples feet. Recall that on Holy Monday we read the story of Mary of Bethany, who washed Christ's feet with her hair, an even greater sign of submission. And that she had used a jar of pure nard, worth a years' wages to anoint Christ's feet. The disciples were appalled. A woman letting down her hair in public and the wastefulness of using such an expensive perfume. But, Jesus says, in Mark's Gospel (Mk 14:8a), "She has done what she could." It is but another instance of a human being displaying the character of God. This God, our God, through the Son of Jesus Christ, is perfectly submitted and that He is also a prodigal God, a God that gives freely and abundantly, to all! For the text in John's Gospel says that the smell of the perfume filled the room! A spice meant only to prepare Christ's feet, ended up being a blessing to all. So it is with our God when He acts...He may act for a single person, but it always ends up blessing everyone around.

And so, in a literally groveling act of submission, Jesus shows us how we are to treat one another. We are to serve one another. We are supposed to be willing to do anything, however distasteful, for one another. We are called to put aside our own wants and needs and desires, to serve each other. And through that act of

submission, we are not to allow our petty squabbles to derail our work in spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We call this day Maundy Thursday. It is the night that Jesus is betrayed by Judas. It is a night that began so well. The disciples are all at table with Jesus, enjoying some privacy, fellowship and a meal together. It is the night when Christ instituted the Holy Eucharist, so foundational to our weekly worship. It is the night when He said, according to St. Paul (1 Cor 11:24-25), “This is my Body which is for you” and “This cup is the new covenant in my blood.” This would be the night that Christ would institute this New Covenant, the covenant prophesied by Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel; the New Covenant, *mandatum novum* in Latin, and so we get our English **Maundy** Thursday, or New Covenant Thursday.

Jesus and the disciples are simply play-acting, albeit reverently, the Passover. They are remembering, through an ancient liturgy, the night before the Exodus of the people of Israel from Egypt over a thousand years before. Recall that they were held as slaves in Egypt by Pharaoh. He has held them for many generations, but Moses comes to set them free. Even after the Pharaoh promises to release the Israelites from their bondage, he changes his mind. Nine plagues are visited on the people of Egypt and still Pharaoh will not let the Israelites be released. Finally, the Lord our God visits the worst of all as the tenth plague, the death of the firstborn of all in Egypt. And in order for the people of Israel to be passed over, thus Passover, by the Angel of Death, they are to perform the ritual outlined in our reading from Exodus chapter 12.

The people of Israel are to take a male lamb without blemish and to kill it. Then each family is to sprinkle blood over the doorway of their homes as a symbol to God that they are to be passed over by death. They are to eat the flesh of the lamb and they are to eat bitter herbs, and unleavened bread, gird their loins, and put on their sandals all to symbolize the haste with which they are leaving Egypt. This first Passover was the Last Supper the people of Israel were to have in Egypt; just as Christ and His disciples were to have their Last Supper together before His

crucifixion. And so it is, that every time we come to the Holy Eucharist, this is to be our Last Supper in bondage to our sin. Each time we begin anew, cleansed from our sins, and prepared to start a new life in Christ. There should be that hope of new life each time we come to the table; expectation that this will be our Last Supper captive to our own sinful ways.

Jesus is with the disciples in the upper room. They are eating this meal and then, Jesus does something very strange. He says that the blood of the Passover lamb is His blood and that those who believe in Him must drink this blood. Instead of sprinkling the lamb over the doors of the homes, He wants them to sprinkle His blood over their hearts. Jesus also says that the unleavened bread, the bread baked without yeast, is His body. All throughout the Bible, the leavening, the yeast is equated with sin. Jesus is saying that the unleavened bread is equal to His sinless body. As well, the male lamb without blemish, without sin if you will, is Jesus Christ Himself.

Still they are having a good time with Jesus, although He speaks such strange things. They have had so much wine during their celebration that they are sleepy in the Garden of Gethsemane.

But, then, what began so well, ends in such torture. Christ in agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, sweating blood, and wrestling with God over His path, His duty. The disciples unable to even wait and pray with Him one hour. The ignominious betrayal by one of His own. The transport from palace to palace, the questioning all through the sleepless night. Utter exhaustion as the day dawned even gloomier on Friday morning.

Oh, the utter despair that the disciples must have felt! The impending doom of defeat, of the end of such a good thing that had been going on for three glorious years.

And tomorrow would not get any better. This is Maundy Thursday, and everything seems so bad, so out of control...but Good Friday is coming...it's going to get worse, much worse, before it gets better.