

Come Empty & In Love

— Preparing For The Passover Meal —

Maundy Thursday, April 9, 2020

The Passover meal — which Jesus said he **greatly desired** to share with his disciples before he died — is ready. The bread and the wine are already on the table. Once Jesus gives thanks and blesses them, they will be ready to eat & drink. But the **disciples** are not ready for this last supper, the first Eucharist. For this is a new **kind** of Passover. Similar — and yet profoundly different — from the Passover they are accustomed to. And the disciples don't yet have the "*disposition*" or the "*understanding*" that they need *in order to benefit* from eating this bread & drinking this wine.

Jesus greatly desires for them to experience all the benefits of his Passion. And so — *in the confidence of... knowing... where he came from & where he was going* — Jesus gets up from the table, takes off his nice clothes, gets down on the floor, and (*of his own free will & desire*)... proceeds to do the highly "*dishonourable*" work that Masters made their Slaves do (*for their honoured guests*.) One by one, he begins washing his disciples' dirty feet.

He **knows** that this will greatly upset them — for no person of honour should demean himself by doing such a degrading thing. And to **allow** such a thing to be done to you (*by anyone but a slave*) was just as dishonourable. Jesus *knows* that his disciples' minds and their personal characters are still tragically "*bent*." *Bent* on always getting glory, laud & honour from others. *Bent* on never getting demeaned, blamed, or shamed by others. So, as usual, Jesus does something to "*un - bend*" them. To help them "*un-learn*" the harmful illusions that they have about him, themselves, and others.

As usual, Peter is the most *doggedly* resistant & vocal, and tries to start an argument. But Jesus won't engage. Instead, he just tells Peter "*You don't know what I am doing right now... but later... you will understand*" — and continues on down the line, washing their dirty feet. But is Peter the only one that doesn't understand what's happening? Based on their behaviour on the journey down to Jerusalem, it's safe to assume that **none** of the disciples understand what Jesus is doing, but will only figure it out much later.

Jesus is giving them the the key piece to the puzzle of his gospel. He is **showing** them (*very up-close & personally*) the kind of radical **freedom** that comes from his **discerning**, and **emptying himself**, of the misguided values, beliefs & ambitions that... what he calls "*the world*"... is always following, and always striving to "*embed*" in his thoughts, words, and deeds. He is showing them that he can do — *what they would not dare to* — because he is **free** — because he "**empties out**" the harmful, "worldly" clutter from his mind, instead of cherishing it. He's showing them, and upsetting them, because he wants them to **enjoy** this same freedom — which is actually **ultimate** freedom — the freedom to give & receive love.

Before they begin eating & drinking — one by one — Jesus "**passes over**" them all:

— **not...** from "on high," **but...** on his knees

— **not...** to pronounce who will be saved & who destroyed, **but...** to transform their hearts & minds by **teaching** them, **enabling** them, to "empty" themselves of all that hinders them from freely giving & receiving love as he does.

This is the spirit of his Passover, the Eucharist — the spirit of his Covenant — the spirit that brings "*another*" human world into being — by liberating hearts & minds from their tragic illusions about God, themselves, and others. According to Jesus, this is God's humble, nonviolent way of redeeming the human world, and always has been (*for those "with ears to hear" & "eyes to see."*) He has come not to change **the Covenant**, but to dispel our harmful illusions about it, and show us how it actually gets fulfilled. He has come to change **us**.

When he finishes washing all of their feet, he gets up, puts his clothes back on, and invites them back to the Passover table. And when they are all seated, with their clean feet under the table — before he prays the great thanksgiving & invites them all to eat the bread & drink the wine — he asks them a question about what just happened: "Do you **know** what I have just done to you?"

Obviously, they know that he had just knelt down & washed all of their feet, like a common slave. But Jesus is asking if they understand what was happening "**beneath the surface**" of that act. Did they understand **why** he was not at all reluctant, or afraid, or ashamed to wash their dirty feet? — **why** he was able to do it with such ease & lack of inner conflict? — and why it was important for them to experience **him** doing it — **to them** — and not the other way around?

No one speaks up. And Jesus already knows that they won't be able to answer this question for themselves for some time. But, still, he gives them **his** answer, and offers them a way, over time, to make it their own.

First, he acknowledges his own dignity, self-respect, and confidence in himself as their Teacher and their Lord. They are right to esteem him highly.

But they are wrong if they imagine that his getting down on the floor and washing their dirty feet — in any way **diminishes** his dignity — or makes him **unworthy** of respect & kindness (*even if Peter sarcastically demeans him for it.*)

If that is what they imagine, then their **understanding** has been "warped" by what he calls "the world." And he offers them a practical way, a sacred ritual, to start "emptying themselves" of that warped understanding: wash **each other's** feet, just as he washed theirs.

Now, remember who we are dealing with here. The twelve have been fighting with one another all the way down to Jerusalem — fighting about which one of them is "the greatest of all," which one of them deserves the greatest honour, praise, and glory (*2nd to Christ, of course*). Jesus knows that if they (intentionally, prayerfully) get down on the floor; become "like slaves"; and begin carefully washing each other's dirty feet..... **the Spirit will move** within & between them, pouring the love of God into their hearts. And they will come to see their "*holier than thou*" convictions... as nothing but vain strivings to be worthy of God's love. Strivings that conceal their secret fears of having no dignity — conceal their self-loathing beneath their pretence of greatness. This will turn them upside down. But the Spirit will be with them in the act of washing others' feet, reminding them of how Jesus loved them absolutely, knowing full well that they were **not** "holier than [any] thou." The Spirit will **join** with them in the act of humbling themselves —and **teach** them beyond a shadow of doubt — that their relentless strivings to prove themselves worthy of God's love only do them harm, and also harm those who are affected by their actions. That "worthiness" has nothing to do with love. That the Father's love for them is the same love they've experienced from Jesus — absolute & freely given.

In the washing of one another's feet; as they become aware of God's radical love for *them*; as they watch that love move *between* them — being given & received — received & given — again & again.... it will become clear to them that their once fervent convictions (*about who deserves honour & who deserves shame; who deserves love & who deserves hate; who is a sinner & who is righteous*).... are truly false & harmful. And that awareness will be their "turning point," their true, love-inspired repentance. They will see that their tightly held & cherished illusions, are actually like burning coals being grasped in their hands, and they will let them go. In St. Paul's language, they will "empty themselves" of all that is doing harm, all that is hindering them from loving one another as Christ is loving them. A lot more than feet will be getting washed. And Jesus adds — when they come to **understand** these things, blessed are they if they "*do*" them with understanding — *as he just did to them*.

And so it is with us when we understand and co-operate with what God is doing **within us** in the outer ritual of washing one another's feet. Inwardly receiving God's love for us **as we are** in the moment.

Inwardly "emptying ourselves" of our illusions of superiority. Inwardly letting God's love for them (as **they** are in the moment, dirty feet and all) flow through our actions. As we come to understand how it works within our hearts & minds, we can even wash others feet **invisibly**. We can silently do the same "inner work" as we're relating to others — without physically washing their feet.

It can become a regular spiritual reflection:

- *"Of all the persons I will meet today, for how many will I seek the grace — to **let** myself — (invisibly) wash their feet?"*
- *"Of all the persons I will meet today, for how many will I seek the grace — to let **them** — wash **my** feet?"*

When we follow the story of the first Maundy Thursday, it's hard to not be in **awe** of the "teaching style" of Jesus. Before he tells the disciples — "A 'new' commandment I give unto you... love one another as I have loved you" — he has **already** shown them the "**how to**" of fulfilling it. How to empty themselves of the inner obstacles that make the love commandment impossible to realize.

Would that the Church, in the history of its teaching ministry, had been more able to follow that style. Tragically, in our history, we've often been very *zealous* about memorizing "religious facts" we don't understand — and very *boisterous* with our "*Thou shalt's*" & "*Thou shall not's*" — but nearly *silent* when it has come to gently teaching the more subtle "*How To's*" of the spiritual life. Thankfully, in our day, that former ever-striving, unhelpful form of church is passing away. And we are hopeful about many new forms we see emerging with a new spirit and a new mandate.

"Love one another as I have loved you."

It is from this love commandment that Maundy Thursday gets its name. In the old Latin text of the gospel, this verse begins with the word "*mandatum*" — where we get our word "mandate," and its old English form, "maundy." So the verse **might** be read, "*I give you a new mandate - love one another as I have loved you.*" Though, as we've seen, the *key* is not the mandate itself, but knowing how to actually fulfill it in everyday life — which Jesus carefully "builds in" to the love mandate.

He concludes with a final insight about "evangelization" — That it is through the practice of this self-emptying love in our relationships with one another — that "everyone" around us will **know** that we are his students, his disciples.

It's truly amazing... all that happened before the first Eucharist. And it's even more amazing that **all of this...** was done just to **prepare** the hearts & minds of the disciples — to eat the bread — and drink the wine — in the right spirit.

And so it is with us. When Jesus calls us to his Passover meal, he wants us to (*with his help*) come to the Table — "empty" — and in love — so that we, and the world around us, will receive the utmost benefit. *A benefit that still has its redeeming, transforming effects, even in times like these, when we are only able to receive the Eucharist inwardly & invisibly.* Thanks be to God.