

Maundy Thursday

The old word *Maundy* is a kind of relic of the word *mandatum*, which is the Latin for a commandment, and forms the first word of the antiphon sung at the washing of feet: *a new commandment I give to you: to love one another as I have loved you*. This ritual sets the tone for this day's special quality.

We cherish the Holy Eucharist as the sacramental sign of Christ with us. It is the heart of our religious practice, it is the bread of our lives. This evening Mass is full of grace for us, because this was the evening of the first Eucharist, the day of Jesus' self-giving. His death on Good Friday is a direct consequence of what he says and does on Thursday; we are invited to sit at the table at this Last Supper, not only to break the bread and share the cup, but to share in the mind of Christ, to let the Word of God take possession of us. The physical feeding carries with it the spiritual: and thus we grow in all ways into the mystery of Christ.

But there is nothing in the ritual of this night so powerful as the washing of feet. Let us think of it and its meanings.

It is very menial work to wash others' feet. We have record of the fact that in Roman society, the washing of feet was something not even a slave could be commanded to do. Peter knows, and feels this, very strongly. It is, he thinks, improper for Jesus to do this. Why Peter? Because it is Peter who says of the Cross itself: *Never! This will never happen to you!* Dying on a Cross, we may believe, is not the improper, but the unthinkable. Jesus is teaching Peter, by choosing to do what seems improper, to think the unthinkable. *Now you do not understand. Soon you will.*

These are not the miraculous, tiny feet of a baby, or the slender feet of ballerinas. They are fishermen's feet, and they have come a long way. Feet are the workhorses of the body. They are the lowest bit, humble and hardened. They are nearest to grit and grime; and they are nearest to the earth, the birthplace and burial-place of our nature. When we walk through messy and filthy places, they pick up the evidence and carry it with them. We could say that our feet are our most human members. This is why Jesus washes them, and why he says *unless I wash you, you cannot share with me*.

So see the Son of God, choosing to do the work lower than slavery, and you will understand mysteriously, wordlessly, the depth of his love, the gift he is giving. Think of the grubby deformity of our humanity, which has come so far with its burden of sin; and see the Son of God coming to wash you, honouring with his humility the image of God that is in you, lifting you up into the light of the Father's love. In this ritual he shows you how God comes to you. Do not turn away; as the water loosens the grime of the roads, let the hardness of the heart be dissolved and taken from you. *A new commandment I give to you, that you should love one another as I have loved you*. We must love one another, because he loved us first.