

Maundy Thursday 2010

Exodus 12:1-14

Psalm 116:1,10-17

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

In an upper room,
The table is laid.

It is not a grand feast,
As feasts go,
But for the people who share it,
It is rich with meaning.

Memory and hope are gathered in this moment,
And the meal shared here
Is a beginning,
And a celebration.

Stand on the threshold,
And see them enter the upper room.

Bride and bridegroom,
Tess of the D'Urbevilles and her new husband Clare,
Both of them so innocent
Despite all that has gone before.

They wash their hands
In a single basin.

Which fingers are mine and which are yours?
He asks.
And his bride answers,
They are all yours.

They are all yours.
Nothing that comes after
Can spoil the beauty of this moment.

Leave them in this upper room,
The bride and bridegroom,
Leave them to all the sorrow that follows them
Through that night
And into the days to come.
Come instead to another upper room,
Longer ago and farther away,
it might seem,
And yet infinitely closer,
Because this upper room
Is always here and now.

Again, the table is laid
And in the simple feast,
Those gathered share memory and hope,
As they have so many times before.
In this Passover meal,
All is as it has been for generations.

And then, something unexpected.

Here the story divides.
We can only choose one path at a time.

Week by week, day by day,
We claim that what comes next,
The unexpected moment,
Is the moment when Jesus
Takes bread, and blesses, and breaks it.
And likewise, after supper,
He takes the cup.

We do not remember this moment,
We live it.
We live by it.
It gives us life.

It is for us, now, the place
where the holy meets the ordinary.
The place where the presence of what is most real
Is seen and felt and tasted
And welcomed into our bodies and our souls.

So now, we hold two upper room stories
In our waiting hands.
Let's go back to the threshold,
And enter the room yet again.

We are back with Jesus and his friends,
At the end of the Passover meal.
Again, something unexpected happens.
Jesus gets up from the table,
Takes water,
And kneels to wash the feet of his disciples and friends.

Though we know this story,
We do not live inside it.
We are not ready
For all that it means.

Washing feet.
It has never yet become for us a sacrament,
A place, a moment, a sign
Where we see and touch and taste
The real presence of the holy
Here and now.

For us,
It is only now, this once in the year
That we remember –
Jesus wants to wash our feet,
wants us to follow his example,
And wash each others' feet.

Why?

Yes, it is an act of humble service.
But that is only the beginning.

There is more at the heart of this act
Than the reversal of master and servant.
Foot washing was not, in fact,
A servant's task.
In Jesus' world,
You washed your own feet,
Whoever you were.

Host or servant would bring water
When you entered the house,
And set it before you,
but you washed your own feet.
In fact, Jewish law insisted
That not even a slave
Could be compelled
To wash a master's feet.

Among the Romans,
The power people,
It is true,
A slave could be asked or forced to wash another's feet.
But not in Jesus' world.

So who washes another's feet?
Once in a while, we know,
Disciples, as a sign of great respect,
An act of devotion,
Would offer to wash the teacher's or the master's feet.

Disciples and their teacher.
When we understand footwashing
As a sign of the bond between them,
We come closer to the truth,
But there is more.

It is only when the bridegroom meets the bride
That we see the fullness
Of what Jesus offers.

In Jesus' time,
The rabbis told a story,
A midrash of Joseph in Egypt,
No longer a slave,
And his betrothal to Asenath,
The daughter of his former master.

When they first see each other
face to face,
she brings water and kneels at his feet.
He stops her, shocked,
And asks that a servant wash his feet instead.

Like Tess of the D'Urbervilles with her Clare,
The bride claims her own.
"Your feet are my feet now," she says.
"No one else shall wash them."

In the union of the self with the other,
The two become one flesh.
Your feet are my feet now,
Says the bride.

What does Jesus offer
When he kneels to wash our feet?
This is an act of love,
An act of love whose power is so awesome
We have never yet been ready
To take hold of it and make it ours.

Only Jesus can love like this,
All the time,
At the feast and on the cross,

And when he kneels at the feet of his friends.

Here he shows us, all over again,
Who we will be
When we take him into ourselves for good
And become his body,
As we are his.

Someday we will take another's feet
Into our willing hands,
Not in humble service,
But in utter and abiding love.
Then we will say,
As he says now,
This is my body.

This is my body.
Your feet are my feet now.
I wash my own feet
When I wash yours.

I believe,
I hope I believe that day will come.

I know it is not here yet.
We are not ready
To wash each others' feet
In any sacramental way,
Any way that makes this sign and symbol
Of the truth that Jesus offers –
That we are one.
One with him,
Always.
One with each other,
Already and not yet.

Not yet.
Not until we see through all our wonderful differences

And know that there is no division
Between your hands and mine.
My feet are the feet
Of any one and everyone I like,
Everyone I dislike or disapprove of,
Everyone I resent or judge.
My feet are the feet of everyone I love.
And my feet are yours.

My feet are the feet
Of the barefoot woman
Who walks three days on rocky ground
To bring her dying baby to a clinic.

Your feet are the feet of soldiers
Whose boots have rotted off,
Sore and scarred and too tired to go on.

Our hands are the hands that hold the empty bowl,
Our feet the feet that wander day and night without a home.

When we are ready,
We will wash each others' feet
Because it is our task to wash our own feet,
And your feet are my feet now,
And our feet are the feet of all.

Someday,
This will be a sacrament,
A sign of our oneness with each other.

Until that day, and always,
We are sustained by the taste of bread and wine,
Jesus' offering of himself to us,
The sacrament of our oneness with him.
This is my flesh,
My body, he says.
And we become his body

When we share in him.

In breaking bread and sharing wine,
We do more than imagine,
More than remember.
In bread and wine,
We are here with him
In the eternal now.

But what do we do here tonight,
When we see the washing of feet?
Again, we do more than imagine.
We remember and we reenact,
And we prepare.
For now, this is symbol,
Not sacrament.
But someday, this too will be holy.

Someday, through this sign too
God will begin to change the world.
When Christ is really present here as well,
Not only as the model of humble service
But as the image of radical, root-shaking love,
This will change the world.

Only love,
The love that lights the sun and all the stars,
The love that looks death in the face and lives,
The love that even shows us our own selves
When we look into another's eyes,
Only love can change the world.

That love is waiting
In the upper room.

Here we are,
On the threshold.

Are we ready?
Shall we enter the room?