



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

Maundy Thursday – April 1, 2021

Scripture Passages: 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, John 13:1-17, 31-35

+I speak to you in the name of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I want to share something with you tonight. Created by British artist, David Bomberg in 1925, this painting is an evocative picture of the Christian ritual of foot-washing that normally happens each Maundy Thursday. Patterned after Jesus' own actions in the Gospel of John it is usually the centre of our liturgies on this night. But this year, like so much else, we have to engage with that act a different way. But that may allow us to think about the significance of the foot-washing from a different angle – to consider its meaning a little more deeply as we're separated from the physicality of it.

That's why I thought I'd share this image – an image that's important to me. Although it's supposed to be an impression of an actual event – the Bishop of Jerusalem washing the feet of the Patriarch of Jerusalem in the Armenian quarter in a 12th century church, very little has been written of that actual encounter. But it's one of the jewels in the Bomberg collection.

I discovered it after watching a program on the artist several years ago – a man unrecognized in his time but who has received much deserved posthumous appreciation in recent years. Ever since, I have used it in my Lenten meditations and prayers. It's warm and intense colouring tells me that something important is happening in the picture. Something attention grabbing and significant. In fact, I'd describe the mood of the painting as warm and loving. That makes sense because of its subject matter: the foot-washing.

Our gospel begins tonight: "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end."

Jesus, knowing that time was short said and did a few things on this last night together with his friends that demonstrated that love.

And I think that this picture captures some of that – and invites us deeper to contemplate lots of things.

The account continues - And during supper Jesus, know that the Father had given all things into his hands and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table,... poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet.”

Notice the two figures in this picture – one in multi colour, rainbow colour even - bent deeply, carefully over the foot of the seated figure. The foot-washer is intent, intense, almost alight and bent low in concentration and focus on what he is doing- he is washing the feet of a reluctant person.

Now look at the one whose foot is being washed. One arm – his right arm - is extended as in a gesture of resistance, one arm braced behind him. He's in one colour – a reddy-orange – a colour almost like an angry blush. Beside the foot-washer's beautiful many colours, he seems dull in comparison despite the strong colour. And if you look closely, it looks like he has a deacon's stole on. That's interesting – a sign of service. And there is something about a struggle here – the one whose feet are being washed is having trouble submitting to the humility of the act.

But of course, the most striking thing about him is his black head.

One thing is for sure – the contrast between the one who washes, who serves, in light, bright multi hues and the one who is being washed and served is clear.

What's beautiful and evocative about this painting is that although it is supposed to be of an actual event, the face of the one who is having their foot washed is blank. The foot-washer is less blank – there is the hint of an eye and a mouth. But the receiver of that action has no face at all. That reminds me of a convention that says when a person is unnamed in scripture, it means that a space is left for that person to be us - the readers.

That's a beautiful and difficult thought.

Now I and all of us to whom this night, this week, is important as a journey with Jesus through the events leading up to and including his death and mighty resurrection are dwelling in the Gospel according to St. John tonight.

And of course, because of that, I see in this painting Jesus washing Peter's feet.

I see a clear-headed Jesus trying to communicate an important truth. And I see a wrong-headed Peter struggling with that truth – that is what the black head says to me. Peter, who is still even now struggling to understand who Jesus is.

Peter who has a grasp that Jesus is special, strange, challenging, other-worldly, powerful, and one whom he loves and therefore who has commanded his attention and respect. But Peter who also knows that Jesus is dangerous – because he is God. And as such he is not predictable, nor tame but ineffable – or too much to be contained by words. Jesus comes not as Peter or any of us expects but according to God’s nature. And that’s a lot. It’s just a lot to take in.

But there’s also something more here. I see all of us who look on with the eyes of faith – we are the faceless ones too.

Peter looks how I think I’d feel if Jesus were to wash my feet: embarrassed – like it was all wrong, all backward – that I should be washing Jesus’ feet; I think I might also feel embarrassed that anybody’s washing anybody’s feet because it seems such a humble, no humiliating thing to do; I think I’d be caught feeling profoundly loved – cherished even - by Jesus on the one hand and then on the other - overwhelmed with my own sense of unworthiness. I might even feel a bit cross that all of these emotions were being seen by everyone - including Jesus; I think I’d be in a spiritual confusion – how could God be so vulnerable to me? And I think I could well understand how all of that might and probably a bunch more could be portrayed as a kind of resistance.

But then ----- my eyes go back to Jesus – so focused, so beautiful and bright, so intent on this loving action – you can’t fail to feel the love in that figure in this painting – and I begin to relax and feel at peace. There’s something in this scene that makes me lean into the love of the foot-washer. There’s something so lovingly inexorable about this foot-washer – they are intent on performing that action with sacramental importance.

It’s that – that intent – demonstrated with this most humble of gestures – there’s a reason that Jesus chose to wash the disciples’ feet – there was literally no more humble action that a servant could perform – and that’s what gives us a clue to what our faith is all about: love.

Now we say this. We say this a lot – week in, week out. That God sent Jesus, God’s only son to show us what God’s love is like.

But it’s actually hard to express the nature of this kind of love. That’s why it’s good to have a picture or an experience to help us grasp something of its meaning.

You can see here that it’s a love that gives up dignity or self-protection for selflessness and to be wholly for the other person. It’s a kind of love that is beautiful and uncomfortable. And we don’t see it very often in this world.

Jesus, speaking to his most beloved, says to love this way is a commandment. A commandment to his followers to love each other. That was his dying wish. Now when you think of all the things he might have said knowing that his death was drawing near – that he had very little time left – isn't it staggering that that is what he chose to bequeath to us as his last words? Doesn't it tell you something about their importance?

“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples.” So that it's clear, that means that loving as Jesus loves us is the content of our discipleship. It is what makes and sustains the church.

But it's more than that – for those who do not yet know the name of Jesus – the way we love each other (with the help of the Holy Spirit of course) is also the path by which we lead others to the Christ.

And the meal of love and thanks – the sacrament that we celebrate – the Lord's supper – is the celebration of Jesus' sacrifice for our sake. Again, he demonstrates that focused, intentional and humble love. His blood poured out for us; poured out as the example of the way forward for us to love in the same way. His body broken and laid down for us so that we'll know how to lay down our lives for others.

A new commandment indeed.

Love one another as I have loved you.

+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.