

It is Maundy Thursday once again and we come to reflect on the events of the last week of the earthly life of Jesus. Certainly, we come to ponder the significance of Christ's last supper with his disciples; but, on this particular Maundy Thursday, our scripture leads us to focus on the act of foot washing Jesus performed for his disciples.

The Gospel writer tells us: *Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper, laid aside his garments, and girded himself with a towel.* Jesus had come from God and was going to God. All things had been given to him by his Father. There is so much of vast importance and depth in this verse that we can't full wrap our minds around it.

But what we can understand is the picture of the Savior with a towel and basin, attending to the most humble of duties of a house-hold servant – washing the feet of those at table. Jesus' act of washing the disciples' feet is the symbol for his cross and the cleansing of our lives which his atoning work at Calvary would accomplish. He did for us what only he could do; the One who came from God and who was going to God.

When I reflect on this supreme act of loving service on Christ's part, I can't help but contrast his act of washing to another type of washing, with a very different purpose. Think of Pontius Pilate, who had declared Jesus innocent on two distinct occasions in the course of that wildly frightful morning of our Lord's crucifixion day. But when faced with a frenzied mob, shouting NOT for justice, but for blood, Pilate chose to side with the mob, and he turned Jesus over to be crucified.

Having caved into the pressure of sinful people, Pilate ordered a basin of water and made a public gesture of his avoidance of responsibility – his responsibility for defending an innocent man. He wash-ed his hands in view of the whole multitude. And then he told them that they would have to bear the guilt for what was to follow.

We look back at this moment from the distance of many intervening centuries, and yet, its meaning is not remote to us. As Christians intent on being serious about our faith and our understanding of WHY Christ had to suffer and die, we may have a problem in identifying with the people who pressed a crown of thorns into Jesus' skull, or who whipped him, or spit on him, or jeered at him, and finally stretched out his arms across the heavy wooden beam of the cross and drove spikes into his hands and feet. That level of brutality is so overwhelmingly ugly and repulsive that we can not honestly see ourselves doing that.

But the hand washing gesture is something else. Have you ever known what it means to stand face-to-face with a person who needed you as the one and only human being who could intervene in a threatening circumstance, and prevent total chaos and disaster from occurring – and then sidestepped that responsibility? Do you know what it is to wash your hands of another person? It usually isn't that we make such a grand gesture of declaring our innocence and lack of responsibility by such a display as Pontius Pilate did. We have other ways which are much more discreet. These include saying phrases such as, "Look, I really don't have time to help you right now," or "You got yourself into this mess, and you'll have to get yourself out of it," or "It's not my

problem.” Such phrases come to mind because they have been in our thoughts and they have come out of our mouths. The spirit of avoidance of responsibility – of failure to care – of refusal to risk doing that which sustains justice and furthers love – were not unique to Pilate and they aren’t to us either.

Pilate’s washing of his hands is a symbol of avoidance – a lack of concern for others – and abandonment of responsibility. What a contrast to Christ’s act of foot washing where the focus is on acceptance or redeeming service – reaching out in love – and the bearing of the most humble of tasks in order to accomplish the greatest of purposes.

Jesus knew that all things had been given into his hands and that his hour of humiliation was near which would be followed by his hour of glory. Such a consciousness might well have filled him with pride; and yet, with the knowledge of the power and the glory that were his, he washed his disciples’ feet. At the moment when he might have had supreme pride, he had supreme humility. He also knew that he was about to be betrayed, and this knowledge might have caused him to be filled with bitterness and hatred. But instead, his heart was filled with even more love and forgiveness. Although it is often natural to resent wrong and to grow bitter under insult and injury, Jesus met the greatest injury and the supreme disloyalty with the greatest humility and supreme love.

This is the gospel message. Christ humbled himself for us and was obedient even unto death on a cross. Our sins are forgiven, no longer held against us – no longer there in God’s mind and memory to stir God’s wrath over our colossal failures. Those sad memories of occasions when we have played the part of Pilate are behind us – not ever to claim us or defeat us again. All that is put away – washed clean from us. We have been served by the Son of God who loved us with a love so great and deep and pure that we can only respond with the deepest thanks from our hearts.

After the foot washing, Jesus told his disciples that they rightly called him “Lord” and “Teacher.” He told them that he had provided them with a living example of serving others and that they were to do the same. Just like the disciples, having been washed, we have washing to do. Having been served, we are called and sustained in the fulfilling work of serving people in Christ’s name. Having been loved, we are to learn how to truly love others.

By example, Jesus taught the disciples a new Law of Love. It is a love that does not look for gratitude; a love that is simply given because it is our service in the name of God. It is a reflection of divine love, if only a feeble one. It is a love of the heart which is acted out in service to others. It is a love of humility and acceptance. As Christians, we are called to “love our God with all our heart and mind and soul, and our neighbors as ourselves.”

The table is set before us. We remember Christ’s last supper with his disciples – his washing of their feet – and the agony he endured on our behalf on Good Friday. It is my prayer that each of us will truly come to understand the sacrifice that Christ, our Lord – our Teacher – and our Passover Lamb – made for us, and that out of a sense of overwhelming gratitude, we will go out and share this love with others. Amen.