

Maundy Thursday - 2009

Sermon Text – John 13:1-17

Theme: *“Allowing Jesus to serve you”*

Grace, peace and mercy to you from our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

You may be surprised to hear the sermon preached so early in the service. “What’s going on?” you might ask. “Why aren’t we doing things in the normal way?” Well tonight we begin our three day journey to the cross where once more we will be witnesses who proclaim Jesus Christ who has risen in victory over sin, death, and the devil. The change in routine reflects that our Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter services are really three parts of one whole service. Therefore you can expect different parts of the service to be found in places you wouldn’t ordinarily find them but together they lead us in our Easter journey with Christ.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Jesus is our servant

Maundy Thursday evening holds a special place in the Christian calendar. It is the evening in which the Lord’s Supper was first given to the church when Christ gave us his body and blood in and with the bread and wine. The Lord’s Supper is not a new Passover meal as the Jews were preparing to celebrate that feast on the Friday evening. No, the Lord’s Supper is part of the new way in which Jesus Christ serves us as his people and it began on the Thursday night, before he was betrayed in the Garden of Gethsemane.

At some stage through the evening, Jesus performed a most unusual ritual. He stood up from the place where he had been reclining, enjoying the meal with his closest friends and followers. No longer was there any doubt that this was the time. Jesus knew the hour had come for him to depart out of this world, to return to his Father.

As a way of preparing for his final journey before his work on earth was finished, Jesus stood up and put aside his outer clothes. Dressed in probably little more than a loin cloth, Jesus took a towel and began to wash the feet of his disciples. Imagine if you can, the thought of Jesus kneeling before you and washing your feet. What humble service of other people.

The astonishing thing about this episode is there is nothing to suggest that Jesus refused to wash the feet of anyone who was there, including Judas who would betray him. Even though Jesus already knew that the devil had put it into Judas’ heart to betray him, Jesus still served those who were his friends and those who were against him. This is the measure of God’s grace for all people. Jesus truly came not for those who are well, but for those who are in need of forgiveness.

We struggle with Jesus serving us

There is a certain irony that one of the ancient ancestors of Israel was Jacob. Jacob’s name was changed to Israel, which means – ‘you have wrestled with God’, and isn’t this the history of God’s people. Constantly struggling against God and his desire to lead us according to his will. Is there any difference with us as the New Israel? Faithful Christians are the new Israel, not because we are heirs through the blood-line of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; but because we are heirs through the blood of Jesus Christ which was shed for us. And just as the original Israelites struggled with God, we too continue this struggle today.

The reaction of Peter in tonight’s reading shows us a measure of how we struggle with the idea of God serving us through the person of Jesus. As Jesus approached Peter to wash his feet, Peter reacted strongly and said, “Lord, do you wash my feet?” Surely Peter realised this wasn’t the way things should be done. If anyone was to be served, this would be Jesus. The last thing Jesus should be doing is serving his followers, and certainly not such a menial task as washing his disciples feet!

When Jesus pointed out that Peter wouldn’t understand the reasons why he was serving this, but that later on he would understand, Peter continues to argue the point, “You shall never wash my feet.” Humanity doesn’t want Jesus to be serving us in ordinary ways. If we are prepared to let Jesus serve us, we want the big miracle. We want a sign of service that is fitting for the Son of God.

Would we say Peter is doing the wrong thing? Probably not. Peter is trying to honour who Jesus is and the role he has been playing in teaching, preaching to and leading his disciples for the past three years. Peter is most likely saying to Jesus, he shouldn't have to do this work. "You shall never wash my feet."

But now Jesus tells us a solemn truth. "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me." Even though we might try to put Jesus up on a pedestal, it does us no good to be merely looking at Jesus. There are plenty of people in the world who know something *of* Jesus, but he wants more. Jesus wants to serve us.

So Peter then swings wildly in the other direction. "Lord, not me feet only but also my hands and my head!" It's almost as if Peter can't help himself. He wants to be noticed. He wants to be seen as the one who is closest to Jesus. The one who is prepared to go the extra mile for him. Remember that it was Peter who promised Jesus he would lay down his life for him. It was Peter who came to Jesus, walking on the water – always Peter wanting to be noticed.

If we as Christians aren't struggling against Jesus, we are demanding to be noticed, setting the terms on which we are prepared to have Jesus serve us. Once more Jesus gently puts Peter in his place. "The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean." There is no need for Peter's theatrics. All he needs to do is be quiet and let Jesus serve him in the manner Jesus chooses to.

We serve others with Jesus' love

The evening continued with the tragic tale unfolding where Judas allows Satan to guide him to betray Jesus. The tale is tragic because at any time Judas could have turned back to Jesus and asked him to forgive him. We know that Jesus would have forgiven him because that is God's will – to restore people back to himself. But instead Judas continues on his path of destruction.

Once Judas leaves, Jesus tells the remaining disciples that now is the time for the Son of Man to be glorified and that God will be glorified in him. This would not be any glorious, triumphal march into Jerusalem, but it would be an inglorious and humiliating journey to the cross. But here, in the midst of suffering and weakness is where God is truly glorified. Here God's work of salvation is won for all people.

As a parting gift, Jesus gives to his disciples a new commandment, "that you love one another". Love one another as Jesus has loved you. This means thinking of the other person and loving them for who they are, not who you want them to be. Look at them and love them through Jesus' eyes. And by this will all people know that you are Jesus' true disciples. All of the 'Jesus bracelets' and bumper stickers and church worship doesn't say much if you don't have Jesus' love inside of you for all people. Jesus wants to continue serving his people and he does so through your love for others.

Sometimes this loving others can be hard work. Someone may have hurt you or done you wrong, or maybe they just aren't very nice. But take heart for you are not alone. Jesus continues to come to serve you and fill you with *his* love. Jesus serves you and strengthens you through his body and blood which he continues to give you through the Lord's Supper.

As you journey with the whole church this Holy Easter, allow Jesus Christ to serve you, to lead you and to fill you with his love.

Amen.