

**Sermon : John 13, 1-35**

Every life is marked by those salient moments, that is, by experiences which stand out in our minds as before-and-after events, such as our first day of school or our first communion. The course of history has likewise been determined by life-changing episodes among which the current outbreak of the Corona virus will inevitably find a place on the charts of historians to come. The Church, too, has its own set of before-and-afters which we celebrate throughout our liturgical year. One of the most important of these is tonight, the eve of the Lord's Passion. Yet historians may very likely look back on the *Triduum* of 2020, these three days leading up to this year's feast of Easter, in the light of a before-and-after event, a time when we are obliged to celebrate virtually in physical isolation from one another. How paradoxical this is within the context of our Christian faith that is all about embodiment and which we affirm in our corporate worship, week after week, when we say: « Though we are many, we are one body, because we all share in one bread ».<sup>1</sup>

It is precisely the institution of the Eucharist by Jesus together with another seemingly simple gesture, the washing of the feet, a practice we reserve for specific celebration on Holy Thursday, which bring us together tonight in spirit even if we must keep physically distant from Fr Richard and from each other in order to combat the spread of Covid 19. This context does not mean our worship is dis-embodied or that we preach a dis-embodied Christ. Our virtual gathering requires more of us than just sitting comfortably in front of the screen! The events of Holy Week invite us into the wholeness of the human reality of Jesus' last week in Jerusalem.

Walking the way of the cross may become all the more real for us, as we are physically deprived of receiving the Eucharist - not to mention the washing of feet, this strange, mysterious and disturbing gesture, which, as it did to Peter, brings us up short. Yet it is good to remember that in first century Palestine, the washing of feet was commonplace. People walked barefoot or in open sandals on dirty, dusty roads. On arriving anywhere, your host would most probably have met you with a basin of water for you or a slave to wash your injured and unclean feet. Health and safety issues aside, the washing of feet was seen as a mark of true hospitality as well as a purification ritual to be accomplished by priests<sup>2</sup> and pilgrims prior to entering the temple. We recall to mind another Gospel account of how Jesus' feet were washed several times over with tears and precious oil by a woman of rather contentious reputation.<sup>3</sup>

Yet the account of Jesus' washing of his disciples' feet may be described as a silent revolution. Indeed, John begins his account of the event in a very solemn, almost liturgical way. He relates Jesus acting, not speaking, and leaves the silence to speak for itself. The Word of God therefore stems literally from the body of Jesus. In John's account, which starts with a kind of undressing sequence of huge significance, Jesus is suddenly revealed before his disciples and ourselves in this prelude to his passion and death. It is said that garments make the man. They show who we are, the authority we bear and our standing in society. By taking off his clothes, Jesus totally subverts the hierarchy in place in what constitutes, according to theologian Kenneth Leech, a political action. Hitherto, the washing of feet had symbolically conformed to the reigning social order whereas now, it becomes a

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/common-worship/holy-communion#mm7c>

<sup>2</sup> Ex 30, 18-21.

<sup>3</sup> EgLk 7, 36-50.

challenge.<sup>4</sup> If we can picture the scene for a moment, we sense that the tension becomes almost unbearable. We see Jesus in all his nakedness taking up the basin of water, kneeling in turn before each of his disciples and touching their feet - the lowest member of the body - with his own hands, and thus abolishing the intangible distance of sight in this intense moment of physically sensual contact.

This action on the part of Jesus is not the fruit of happenstance. Both the hand and the foot are body parts that articulate our humanity and foster our identity. Our hands are the major means by which we first connect to the world around us. Hands receive the newborn as it emerges from the mother's womb. According to the ancient legend of Achilles, our feet link us to the earth of which we have been created and thereby to our ultimate vulnerability. Then there is the action of kneeling - not just lowering or bending to another - which shows the intention to place him above ourselves, to be last rather than the first, in a willful desire, in a love that embraces not only all his strengths - what is strong and beautiful within him - but also and above all the core of his weakness. Through the gesture of his son, Jesus-Christ, who takes on the role of a slave, God reveals himself to be a suffering and social God, who alienates himself from our existing models of subordination and substitutes them by the dominion of love, service and abandonment. Thus God calls us to practice the same subversive activity.<sup>5</sup>

We are challenged to begin this now by fighting the spread of the Corona virus, in applying to the best of our abilities the great commandment to love, just as Jesus reminds his disciples during his very last night on this earth: « Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another ». For us today, this means that we should maintain social distancing, leave some items on the supermarket shelves for others and, in the midst of our own isolation, remember those who are without a place to self-isolate and remain all the more vulnerable to the pandemic. The subversive character of these actions resides in our “determination not to be defeated by fear, but to be governed by love ».<sup>6</sup>

There will be a before and after. The current lockdown will come to an end but the world will have changed, socially and economically, in many aspects of our lives. For us then the challenge will be, as we move away from confinement, to strive to incarnate the subversion expressed by the bare flesh of Christ during the washing of the feet. This does not mean that we are asked to live with a bowl of water in our hands. Rather Jesus invites us to reciprocate this gesture metaphorically and continuously by our bodies and souls in service.

The washing of the feet contrasts radically with the nice, reassuring and comfortable formalism surrounding our weekly celebration of the Eucharist where the liturgical theater provides an amazing setting that magnifies the human body in its higher parts while it hides its lower imperfections under beautiful vestments. However, the Eucharistic worship through which we come to share the body of Christ can only find true meaning when our everyday lives reflect the body of Christ as it was shown in the washing of the feet, because it is this very same body which we receive in the sacrament. Oliver Quenardel, abbot of the Abbey of Cîteaux, the home of the Cistercian Order, once wondered whether our

<sup>4</sup> K. Leech, *We preach the Crucified Christ*, New York, Church House Publishing, 2005, p. 49.

<sup>5</sup> K. Leech, *We preach the Crucified Christ*, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

<sup>6</sup> L. Cavanagh, « Companionship with God and others in the Covid-19 pandemic », *Church Times*, 26 March 2020, <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2020/27-march/comment/opinion/companionship-with-god-and-others-in-the-covid-19-pandemic>

negligence of the washing of the feet in the ordinary life of the church might not negatively impact our daily Eucharistic discipleship,<sup>7</sup> Holy Communion coming to fruition in our service to those around us.

At this point, we do not know when we will next be able to receive communion physically under the consecrated elements of bread and wine. Yet we can spiritually receive Christ in us through desire and insight, and sacramental grace will be granted to us because we long for that union with Christ which the sacrament provides. Never the less, we look forward to the day when we will once again be able to share in the Celestial banquet physically gathered around the Lord's table, just as we, the church, are the physical manifestation of the body of Christ body here on earth.

Perhaps our imposed fasting and isolation will enhance us spiritually. Throughout the history of the Church, persons seeking to deepen their relationship with God have fasted and sought isolation in the desert. We followed the paths of some of these seekers during our chapel pilgrimage to Italy two years ago. Our place of self isolation can be like a desert, where we come face to face with some uncomfortable truths about who we really are ... But the desert experience can also have a before and after, which opens us to a new kind of freedom in relation to God and changes our perspective so that we might give thanks for all the good things we have. Isolation is not an end in itself. The desert fathers along with those secluded in religious life often mention how their separation from the world actually draws them closer to others. So let us not consider our confinement as a mere parenthesis until normal Sunday worship resumes, but as an opportunity to reflect on how our respective sacramental practices can be expressed in our practical love to those around us. So in the company of each other, of Saint George and all the saints, let us pray that wherever we are and whoever we are, this time of isolation and fasting may lead us individually and as a church to wash the feet of Christ, fully renewed by his Resurrection.  
*Amen.*

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<sup>7</sup> O. Quenardel, « Eucharistie et lavement des pieds » (from the web)