

Sermon, Maundy Thursday, 2024

Brookton, Beverley, Quairading & York

In Holy Week of 1945 during the Second World War II two female prisoners succeeded in escaping from a German concentration camp. When the Nazis discovered this, they ordered all the other female prisoners to stand in a row. Every tenth woman was taken out of the line to be killed. (Presumably, all the women were regarded as having helped the other two to escape.) One of those randomly selected was a Jewess who was also a Communist. As you might understand she was hated doubly by the Nazis. When she was ordered to step out, she began to weep. She pleaded, "Please have mercy on me. I have a little child." "What do we care for a dirty Jewish child?" the guards replied.

Next to the Jewish woman stood an emigre Russian Christian by the name of Maria Skobtsova. An inner voice told her to step forward to say that she wished to die in the place of the Jewess. At first, she resisted. Why give her life for someone who not only wasn't a Christian, but was a Communist also? However, Maria remembered that it was Good Friday. What's more, the voice persisted. "I died not for the good ones but for the bad ones, for sinners. Someone must die innocently. You step forward and say that you wish to die in her place." Maria did, to the great amusement of the Nazi officers. As she went to her death, she told her executioners, "When God took his people out of slavery in Egypt, it is written in our Bible that He walked before them in a column of fire. I pray when my body burns it would be a column of fire that will show you the way to God." Soon after this, the Nazis lost the war. When the concentration camps were occupied by American and English troops, the prisoners told them what had happened to this Christian woman. It had made a deep impression on them. [*The Voice of the Martyrs*, Sep. 1999, 5]. She has since been canonised by the Orthodox Church.

As we recognise to give one's life for a fellow human being is the greatest love there is. Our Lord gave His life not just for one person, nor even for the sake of the Twelve alone; he gave His life for all people, His enemies as well as His friends.

On the night of His arrest, as the Passover meal was being served, Jesus enacted the meaning of His coming death. By washing His disciples' feet, He showed that He'd come to serve people by His death.

Peter thought it should be the Lord's feet that were washed. "*Lord, do you wash my feet?*" he asked (v 6). Indeed, the One who was humbly washing His disciples' feet was the Lord of heaven and earth. Verse 3 says, "*Jesus [knew] that the Father had given **all things** into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God*". Yet it's just because of whom He is and because of the authority given to Him by the Father that Jesus' death is valid for all people of all time.

If Peter had persisted in his objection to what Jesus was doing, he would have ceased to be one of Jesus' disciples. In response to the Lord's warning, Peter had a dramatic change of heart: "*Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!*" (v 9). Peter's hands and his head had already been washed. It was only his feet that needed washing after the dusty journey. Yet there's a deeper level of meaning here. Peter had already been washed clean by Christ. Now it was individual sins that needed attention.

All who believe in Christ and are baptised are cleansed by Him. However, there's the problem with the feet. They easily get dirty and need to be washed again. We sin every day in our thoughts, words, and actions, by the good we fail to do as well as by the wrong we do. We continue to need God's forgiveness.

The good news is that Christ continues to serve us by means of His word that declares repentant sinners forgiven, and by means of His supper or Holy Communion that delivers to us His body and blood to eat and drink. Together with them comes the new covenant of life and forgiveness to all who believe in Him. Our Lord serves us with the benefits of His cross.

Sometimes the question is asked—you might have asked it yourself—about the person who repents, receives absolution and the Lord's Supper, but then sins once again before he/she dies. Does that sin stop a person from going to heaven? Verse

10 helps answer the question. *“The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean”*. The cleansing Jesus gives is greater than the individual sins that dirty the feet. When a person dies with repentance and faith in Jesus, even if there’s no opportunity to receive absolution or the Lord’s Supper at the last moment, that person dies cleansed, forgiven by Him.

By the washing our Lord gave on the evening of His arrest, He’s also given us an example to follow. We’re not greater than our Lord and Teacher. Since He serves us, we’re also to serve one another. We’re to do good to **all** people as we have opportunity. We have a special responsibility towards our brothers and sisters in the faith (Gal 6:10). Jesus says to **disciples**, *“If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet”* (v 14).

When we speak of the Lord’s Supper, we usually think of what the Lord gives us in the Supper, the Eucharist. What also needs to be considered is what the Lord makes of us by means of the Eucharist. In 1 Cor. 10(:17) St Paul says that *“Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread”*. In other words, in His supper the Lord joins us together as members of His body. In that one body we’re to serve one another. To do so, we need to resist gossip, slander, or ill-feeling. We need to do what will benefit our fellow member. We need to bear with one another in love. We need to encourage each other, not tear each other down. We need to share each other’s burdens, joys, and sorrows with genuine concern for each other.

Along with the example of service our Lord has given us, comes His new commandment: *“Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another”* (v 34). The commandment is new because it has a new basis—His love for us that led Him to give His life for us. Who can love like that? Yet as we recognise our need and seek His cleansing and powerful Holy Spirit, He’ll come to our aid. He’ll generously strengthen us with His love so that we may indeed love one another.