

Maundy Thursday: Heart and Feet

John 13:1-17; 31b-35

Maundy Thursday is the day when women and men of faith gather to share the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the lived-memory of His Last Supper. It is part of the unsettling liturgy of this week, when we do not take the quantum leap from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday. We walk our way through Holy Week, with our hearts in our mouths, and our feet heavy with foreboding knowing where this road must go.

All the gospels talk about the Last Supper, the story of the fraught bread and wine. John only fleetingly refers to the Supper, and a morsel of bread dipped into wine. But that is all. "During supper...rose from supper..." A quote from Psalm 18, *'He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me'*; and the *'morsel'* four times. For John the emphasis lies elsewhere and it's there I want to go. How much is the anatomy of the Last Supper bookended by the heart of Judas Iscariot and the feet of Simon Peter?

The gospel writers show a general reserve when it comes to Judas. There are just twenty-two specific references to Judas in all four gospels combined - a total of roughly 1,200 words. Clearly there is distaste around mentioning Judas Iscariot at all. The gospel writers appear to cope with their reluctance by dealing with him as swiftly and damningly as possible. His name is always found at the very end of lists of the twelve disciples, with his hand marked as a traitor long before he does the deed, or any deed. Judas is tarnished from the start. We are not encouraged to give him the benefit of the doubt.

It was during the supper that something entered the heart of Judas. John says, 'the devil'. What possessed Judas? What had happened to corrupt heart, mind, body and soul? Had something

twisted at a supper in Bethany a week before, in the home of Lazarus, Martha and Mary, with Jesus being anointed with costly ointment, and Judas believe the money was wasted and should have been spent on the poor, or been put into the collective money box that supported Jesus' ministry which, John alleges, Judas pilfered regularly? The heart of Judas. Corrupt, corroded, confused, compromised? "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it?" says Jeremiah.ⁱ

But there it is, the heart of Judas at the Last Supper for us to reflect on, and ponder over. As we dare to approach this Lord's Table tonight, have there been times when by word, thought, or deed, we to have betrayed our Lord? Is that why this overlooked detail in the Maundy Thursday narrative has been left? To make us reflect on our actions and our behaviour. Our pockets may not clink with the thirty pieces of silver, but the heart of Judas is not, I fear, a singularly unique reality. It may stand for a metaphor for all the betrayals, great and small, that we have committed over the years. Yet still Jesus' bids us sit with Him, as He bade Judas. And still Jesus whispers to us tonight, there is still time, for you, and for your conflicted heart.

There are feet at the table of the Last Supper too. Many feet. Judas' feet are there, and they will be washed too, along with the feet of the other disciples. Whether dust from the long walk through Galilee, and down the Mount of Olives from Bethany, or dust, and worse, from the fetid narrow streets of Jerusalem, the feet of the disciples would be dirty. In Jewish culture it was a slave's job to wash the feet of others. An inferior would wash the feet of a superior, a disciple the feet of the master, a lowly person the feet of a king. Never would a king kneel down in front of one of his subjects nor a teacher before his disciples.

With very few exceptions we do not consider feet to be the most attractive parts of our bodies. For many of us, feet are functional. Feet are hardworking. Feet carry our weight, enable us to

stand, point us in the direction we need to go. Feet allow us to walk, run, skip, hop, and jump. Because we use feet every day, all the time, they take quite a beating. We cram them into shoes that do not fit, stand on them for far too many hours at a time, and pound them into pavements as we go about our daily business...Barefoot babies may be adorable. Barefoot adults, not so much.ⁱⁱ

Only the Gospel of John tells the story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet at the Last Supper. The timing is strange, out of order. Jesus does not wash the disciples' feet when they first show up at the door. Instead, in the middle of the Passover feast, Jesus removes His cloak, wraps Himself in a towel, pours water into a basin, and one by one washes the disciples' dirty feet. It catches them all off guard, as it does us, for the act of foot washing is not something we are expecting at this sacred supper.

Several years ago on Maundy Thursday we did. It took debates at two Kirk Session meetings, and an undertaking on my part that it was not mandatory for those attending the service. The majority of the congregation that night, we were at Morningside, did not respond to the invitation to do as Jesus did, and commanded. *"If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you."*ⁱⁱⁱ Yet there it is, in the central part of John's telling of the Last Supper narrative. Not the bread and wine, but the washing of feet. A commandment. This do in remembrance of Him.

I remember one of my elders on the night when we washed feet. She really was not sure about it at all. But she reasoned with herself that she didn't want me, her Minister, to feel alone when the invitation was made. So when the time came, very reluctantly, and with considerable embarrassment, she came forward. It is an intimate thing to do, to wash someone. It makes us

feel vulnerable. We have to bare part of ourselves. I washed her feet, knowing how uncertain she was. Looking up only briefly at her face, I saw her eyes were filled with tears. She told me afterwards it was one of the most spiritual experiences of her life. All these years of taking bread and wine and being at communion. Four times a year. And the proper way, with the common cup and real wine! But it wasn't until her feet were washed that she felt truly *touched* by the story of the Last Supper. It became real to her, and she understood what the story was about, and what Jesus meant.

Her reluctance to have her feet washed was profoundly biblical. Brash Simon Peter, *"You shall never wash my feet."* But Jesus did. And the feet of Andrew and James and John, and all the others. And the feet of Judas who was still at table. All the feet of all of those people. The focus not on bread and wine, but on feet.

It is a wonderful thing to have one's feet washed, after all that those feet have been through. Because the foot washing comes at an unexpected time, the disciples knew immediately that this was something out of the ordinary. It is a remarkable act of tenderness at a point in time when the disciples needed a little TLC. Like the woman who anointed and washed Jesus' feet, Jesus paused at the cusp of His own anguish and tended to the needs of His flock. They will not soon forget what Jesus did for them on that dark night. I wonder, did they continue the practice in the years to come? Paul mentions it not in the Corinthians institution of the Lord's Supper, but in the role of an old widow - part of her good deeds being to bring up children, show hospitality, relieve the afflicted and, wash the feet of the saints.^{iv} Why not younger people? Why not the old men? But then again, Paul...!

The Last Supper. Bread and wine may have been on the table, but on the floor somewhere the bowl of water. In the room, the contracting heart of Judas Iscariot, and the reluctant feet of Simon

Peter. And going round them all, the Servant Christ. Seeing into the heart of Judas and what lay buried there amongst its thorns and shards. The devil of doubt, or discontent, or disdain? Then Christ on His knees, taking the feet of His friends in His hands, one by one. Even the reluctant feet of Simon Peter which would soon run with the others away from Gethsemane, and to the courtyard of the high priest and denial.

How much is the anatomy of the Last Supper bookended by the heart of Judas Iscariot and the feet of Simon Peter? It is in the Gospel of John. Betrayal and denial. But also the offer of washing clean, and a new beginning, if we have faith enough to perceive and receive.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ *Jeremiah 17:9*

ⁱⁱ *Kathleen Long Bostrom, Feasting on the Gospels, John, Vol 2, p110*

ⁱⁱⁱ *John 13:14-15*

^{iv} *I Timothy 5:10*