

Jesus said, a new commandment I give you: that you love one another. Maundy Thursday, from the Latin “mandatum” means commandment, or better still, mandate. Jesus gave his followers a mandate. Just as I have loved you, so you should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples.

With these words, and the liturgical actions of breaking bread, pouring wine, and washing feet, Jesus begins his final day, his final steps toward the cross. And we begin our Triduum, the great Three Days, the single liturgy which stretches from Maundy Thursday over Good Friday, and ends with Evening Prayer on Easter Day. We walk with Jesus, step by step, over these three days to the cross and beyond it, to the resurrection.

The disciples did not know that yet. They were in this moment, with Jesus. They didn’t know it would be their last meal with him this side of death. How must the actions of breaking bread and the words, This is my body that is for you: do this in remembrance of me, sounded to them? This cup is the new covenant in my blood. *Do this*, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me. How portentous, and painful those words must have seemed. Jesus had been trying to tell them for some time now that he was going to die. They haven’t been able to understand what he was saying. Now by these actions, Jesus was drawing them into his death. Involving them. Implicating them. My body will break *for you*. Eat it. My blood will pour out of my body *for you*. Drink it. As often as you drink it. That is, repeat this action that reminds you of this pain you’re feeling right now.

And then, into this scene of sadness and dismay and confusion, Jesus stands up from the table, and without a word removes the robe of his office as rabbi and leader. Then he begins to perform the next liturgical act, taking the role of the lowest slave, and kneeling in turn at each person’s feet, to wash them clean. You can hear them thinking, what can this possibly mean?! In the three years they have been with Jesus, they have seen him do and heard him say a lot of things they don’t understand. I think that’s why it is only Peter who protests. They are waiting to learn the moral of the story. Peter has always had more concern for Jesus’ dignity than Jesus himself had.

Jesus knelt in front of each one in turn, picked up their dirty, smelly, hairy feet, and washed them clean. Then he stood up again, and put on again the robe of his office, and only then did he give his followers the mandate: as he had done for them, so they must do for one another henceforth. The mandate flows from the Son of God’s liturgical act of taking on humility. We heard on Palm Sunday the hymn from Philippians: Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross. The humble obedience of Jesus didn’t begin and end in the act of washing the feet of his followers. It was a symbol of his larger act of humility; he took on humanity, then he took on our death in its most ignominious form. And why? Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

Do you feel how much Jesus is for you? If we could, we would all be present here today, and if we were all present, we would wash one another’s feet. But do you know that if Jesus were here in his flesh, he would wash your feet? Let yourself imagine that for a moment. The Messiah, the Saviour of the world, loves you. He sees all your dirty, unpresentable parts, and he loves you. If he were here, he would kneel in front of you, and smile at you, and wash your feet. Nothing about you is hidden from God, and he loves you anyway. Maundy Thursday reminds us of this gift from God. You are loved without limit. Amen.