

Sermon Maundy Thursday
Ex 12:1-14; 1 Cor 11:23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35
Rev Dr Jos Strengolt

I love this worship service more than any other of our worship services; it is about the Jewish feast of passover; it is about what Jesus did for us; it is about what God expects from us. I look forward to being allowed to wash your feet - it is our honour to serve you.

My experience is that it feels more embarrassing for you to have your feet washed, than for me who washes the feet. And there is some deep meaning in this.

1 Last supper - Holy Communion

Let us first look at what Jesus did.

The story of Jesus' washing the feet of his disciples is set against the backdrop of Jesus and his disciples celebrating the Jewish Passover meal. This weekend the Jews celebrate this meal - and they have done this since they left Egypt until today. It is the greatest feast in the Jewish calendar.

Jesus and his disciples celebrated the meal in Jerusalem - the city that was in an absolutely festive mood.

It was the feast where Israel remembered how God saved them from Egypt and made them into one people that marched together to the promised land.

During the feast the Jews had to kill a perfect lamb. They had to take some of its blood and put it on the doorpost to ensure that God would not punish them. And then they had to eat the whole animal.

The families had to be ready to move - they would eat the lamb while standing, with sandals on their feet, a staff in their hand, and fully dressed to go.

Imagine the excitement during this feast in Israel. All people were united in their desire to obey God and to go! As one big family they were to walk into the promised land.

This Jewish feast is a beautiful image what our Lord Jesus Christ has done for us. Moses brought Israel into the promised land, but Jesus accomplished a much bigger majestic exodus for Israel and for all people. What Moses did for Israel, was just a shadow of what Jesus accomplished for us.

During his last passover meal in Jerusalem, Jesus took the bread, and said to his disciples that the bread signifies his body; he took the cup of wine and said that this signifies his blood. He compared himself with the lamb that the Jews would eat and the blood they would smear on the doorpost for protection against God's judgement.

Ofcourse the blood of a one year old lamb, just an animal, cannot set our relationship with God straight. That was like a prophesy, a symbol, a type, of the true Lamb of God who would be slaughtered on Good Friday. Jesus Christ is the one who made all things well forever between God and us.

That is why he told his disciples that his body and his blood - his death - have created a New Covenant. A better one.

From the beginning of the church, we have repeated this reinterpretation of the ancient Jewish feast of passover; our Lord is the Lamb of God, sacrificed for the salvation of the world. And it was Jesus himself who plainly told his followers to do this.

Here I am, he says to us. Eat my body, drink my blood. That sounds awful, but it means, only thanks to the death of our Lord, we receive the grace of God. Jesus dies so that we live. This is hard for us to accept. We'd rather work hard for God's goodness, but that is useless. He donates his love and forgiveness graciously to you and I.

2 Washing our feet

When Jesus celebrated the passover feast with his disciples, he knew very well that this was going to be his time for being slaughtered as the true Lamb of God. So I can hardly imagine that the atmosphere at the table was very joyful. The disciples were also very much aware that the Jews wanted to kill Jesus.

Jesus knew his time had come - so he spoke much with his disciples - he gave them his final words. Jesus spoke much, but we only read of one final act. He knelt down in front of his disciples and he began to wash their feet.

Now that was shocking. Really shocking.

Imagine the most famous man in Egypt - maybe someone from the army - to kneel in public, and wash the feet of some soldiers. Shocking. But that is what Jesus did.

Why did Jesus do this? He wanted to teach his followers - us - something about the need of inner cleansing.

If we do not allow Jesus to wash our feet, we are not part of him. It may be painful to allow Him to do it, but there is no other way.

If we do not embrace his death for us, we are not part of him.

Jesus has to humble himself for our sake, and if we do not accept his work of salvation on the cross for us, we do not belong to him.

We all need to be forgiven by God - and Jesus life and death for us, is God's means for doing this. He died because of you and for you.

Because of our baptism and our faith in him, all this wealth of blessing is ours. But in our daily life, we get ourselves in all sorts of troubles, we stumble, we sin, and we have to allow Jesus to forgive us. We live in this world and we get polluted, that is normal, we are not perfect yet, so we go again and again to our Lord for forgiveness.

And each time when we go to him, he bows down, as it were, and cleans your feet.

We need to receive this forgiveness, again and again. And the only place where we obtain it, is by going to God through Jesus Christ.

But we also need to forgive others. That is the lesson Jesus teaches us here. This is tough stuff, because in our daily relations, we do so much damage, large and small, to each other. We all have frictions, and problems and fights. Forgive each other, is what Jesus says.

As priests tonight we will wash your feet to symbolise a few things. On behalf of our Lord, we kneel before you to show in a practical way how our Lord humbled himself for you. How he forgives your sins. What we do is symbolic; what Jesus did on the cross was real.

When Jesus said that we have to wash each others feet, he did not mean that you all have to wash the feet of others. That would be strange. His command is meant to say, forgive the sins of others. He does not want you to do that symbolically, but in reality.

The symbol of the priest doing it for you, is to show what Jesus did. But he never wanted to institute a habit among Christians to kneel and wash each other's feet. That is quite easy to do! It is much harder to forgive each other in reality.

We all have people - even here - who have harmed you, they have been unkind to you, and our Lord Jesus tells you, forgive them. Just as he has forgiven you.

3 Love for the building of community

There is an urgency in this need to forgive each other, as continued bad feelings about others are hurting your own soul. Forgiving the other is the beginning of the healing of your wounds inside.

But actually more important, not forgiving others, also hurts our whole community.

Many christians talk and act as if the personal forgiveness of God is the highest aim of religion. Some churches have even split about the question of how God effectively forgives us. They all agree that God forgives through Jesus Christ, but they fight over our theological reflections about it.

I sometimes hear people speak badly about other churches, because they have some different viewpoints on minor things. That is such a major mistake.

Why did God forgive us? In order to make communion with God and with each other possible. In order to create a new people that lives for God. Forgiveness, salvation, reconciliation is the method - it is not the goal.

We should focus more on the goal that God has, than on the method. God's goal is that we as a community are his people on earth. United, serving each other, loving each other.

God did not save you from your sins, he did not forgive your sins, because he wants to beam you up as an individual into heaven. He forgave your sins for creating a community of people who serve him and each other.

Did you notice that the passage that we read about Jesus washing his disciples feet, is like a sandwich? It is sandwiched between love and love. That is the real thing we should be focused on.

It began with, 'Having loved his own who were in the world, Jesus loved them to the end.' That is the example of Jesus. Self-giving love, even onto the cross.

And it ends with, 'A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.'

Jesus washes our feet and tells us to wash each other's feet. Yes, that includes forgiving each other. But the big banner over all this is: love each other as he loved us. That includes forgiving each other but it goes much further, much deeper, much wider.

Love means that you give to the other what the other person truly needs. It is sacrificial, at your own expense. Just as Jesus loved us, so we are to love each other. More love is not possible, less love is not acceptable.

Criticising others for not being as we think they should be - is not acceptable in the family of God.

Talking bad about other christians or other churches, is completely unacceptable for our Lord. He knelt down to wash the feet of our Coptic Orthodox brothers and sisters, our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters, our Brethren Brothers, yes even for their sisters.

If Jesus showed so much love to them and forgives their sins, how dare we be so critical and not embrace them warmly as our brothers and sisters!

Our love will never be as perfect as the love of our Lord - so we need much forgiveness. Our Lord showed us that he gives it to us, even at the cost of his life. He kneels before you to wash our feet. He offers himself to you in bread and wine. What a gift for you - our Lord gave himself and you can come. Just come.

Like Israel in the past at the passover meal, our Lord wants us to eat and drink, and to stand ready, with the staff in our hand, dressed for walking together as one big family of God. We are together on the way to the promised land - to being with our Lord forever.

But we must be that family, united, together, forgiving each other, caring for each other. All that is summarised in this one word, love.

And while we, as one big family, march to the promised land, more and more people will join us. Just as many people from Egypt joined Israel to go to their new land. More and more people will join us if we march together in love.

By this love, everyone will know that you are a disciple of the Lord. Do we need programs, methods, activities for growing the church of God? Jesus only mentions love as our mission method. Because iof we love, we show the true character of our Lord Jesus Christ himself.

Conclusion

So today, enjoy the love of our Lord Jesus - he forgives your sins and he embraces you as you are.

And accept the homework that our Lord gives us. Forgive people who harm you, step over your wounded pride, and love each other.

By loving and being loved, we all get better and we reflect our loving Lord to each other and in this world.

Amen