

St Phillip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Maundy Thursday, 5 April 2012

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I am going to start all of my the sermons over Easter in the same way — by setting the scene and putting the events of Holy Week into context. For Easter is like a drama — there is a plot, a story line, central characters and a stunning ending. The drama takes place in a particular time and place, but speaks of universal truths. As I set the scene and we hear the story again over Easter, perhaps you can discern where and how this story speaks to our world, countries and individuals. The questions we can ask over and over again are: who am I in this story? am I with Jesus or against him? am I with the powers and principalities or am I with the powerless? Do I 'get' what the Lord is saying or am I as lost and fallible as the first disciples?

Jesus rides into Jerusalem those many centuries ago into a particular socio-political world. He has come from Galilee, an outer region of Palestine, to the Holy City, the city of the temple and of government. As you all know, the Romans occupy Palestine. It had previously been occupied by the Greeks, and before that overrun by the Assyrians and Babylonians. This is a country that had known foreign rule and oppression for centuries. It was also a country with a tradition and story of covenantal grace and liberation long ago from Egypt. Palestine in the time of Christ was a hotbed of civil unrest, corruption and revolution. Many powers and groups vied for dominance.

Rome of course was the most obvious and most powerful group. Its legions were garrisoned in Jerusalem to be on hand to suppress any uprisings — which it did in the most viscous and thorough of ways. Crucifixion was the preferred option, a bloody, humiliating, painful death. Amongst the Jews there were a diverse range of groups trying to find ways and means to accommodate and get on with the occupiers, separate themselves from them, or throw them out.

The Pharisees wanted to reform the Jewish faith so that its rituals and rites of purity were available to all. Through this, they were building an alternative support base and centre of control. The Sadducees were the ruling elite, which held fast to the idea that only the priests and holy men could participate in Jewish rituals. The Essenes were an ascetic group who separated themselves from the rest of the population and tried to live the most holy and righteous lives possible. Running through this were various attempts to reinstate native kings from various lines of descent. Bandits were a thorn in the flesh of both occupier and peasant as they robbed travellers and villages and would side with various revolutionaries at different times.

At the centre of this is the temple cult, the site and place of symbolic and real power in the lives of the Jewish masses. It controlled the purity/impurity codes and laws and the debt repayment cycle.

Put all this, plus oppressive and unfair Roman and temple taxes, into the mix and you have a poor class who are indeed, 'lost and without a shepherd'. Marginalized, bound by religious rules and codes that are life draining, taxed to the brink of starvation and revolt, in debt to rich landholders; no wonder they crowded around prophets like John the Baptist and Jesus who seemed to offer a way out.

And Jesus did — but not in the way they and we expect. He didn't come with an army of angels. He didn't wield a sword. He didn't lobby the government. He embodied and taught something quite different — the Kingdom of God that begins as a small seed and from the bottom up transforms the world.

Tonight's ceremony takes us to one of his most liberating teachings — his teaching and practice of service. In the Old Testament, the coming Messiah is described as a “servant” (Isaiah 42:1). The New Testament in Acts and Philippians describes him similarly (Acts 3:26, Philippians 2:5-8). In Matthew we hear that as the Perfect Servant, Jesus taught his disciples that the pathway for greatness in God's kingdom was found by travelling the low road of a servant (Matthew 23:11). And as we see in tonight's passage, Jesus demonstrated the consistency of a true servant's heart by washing His disciples' feet just a few hours before He was crucified (John 13:3-5).

“Servant” in our English New Testament usually represents the Greek *doulos* (bondslave). Sometimes it means *diakonos* (deacon or minister); this is strictly accurate, for *doulos* and *diakonos* are synonyms. Both words denote a person who is not at their own disposal, but belongs to their master. Bought to serve his master's needs, to be at his beck and call every moment, the slave's sole business is to do as he is told. Now this is just weird, is it not? Jesus by his words and actions is saying that we obtain our freedom through service, the service of a bound slave. While the rest of the country is running around trying to work out who in control, how to get on or how to overthrow the governing powers, reforming religion or praying really hard, Jesus takes off his outer robe, ties a towel around his waist and begins to wash his followers' feet.

And the disciples are undoubtedly shocked and amazed. He was their master! He was their Lord! Foot washing is just not something that masters do. Imagine your surprise if you saw the Queen of England giving someone a pedicure?

In the days of Jesus, foot washing was typically done by the servants of one's household, and it wasn't exactly a glamorous job. People's feet get really dry and dirty and calloused and cracked when they walk around for miles wearing sandals. To wash someone's feet was an act of hospitality and care. In that wonderful scene from Genesis, Abraham arranges for the feet of his holy visitors to be washed. In this scene from John's gospel the Eternal Word, the Son of God, the Holy and human one washes the feet of fishermen. In an act of self-emptying humility God holds, washes and dries our feet!

When Jesus has done this service he says this, “I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you . . . and “if you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.”

Not only are we blessed but we also bless others. Service is the seed that ultimately brings new life, fullness of life, both to ourselves and to those we serve. When we serve as Jesus did, with that self-emptying humility we are truly free for when you lay everything down you have you have nothing left to loose. Truly, in service is perfect freedom.

One of my dear friends struggled with the church most of her life. She would go to church kneel and pray, sing hymns and hang around for coffee afterwards but feel cross the whole time! What was this all about anyway? Terrible sermons, boring hymns, very strange people. After a time of personal crisis and radical transformation through the love of God she came back to church and finally asked the most important question. Not what can I get from this experience but what can I give — to God and to others. That question, totally changed her perceptions and experience. And church, would you believe, became an adventure!

Tonight has, of course, been all about service — the tables set, the meals prepared, the cleaning up that will be done. This whole community of St Philip's operates on the loving service of many people, often unacknowledged, often unseen. But friends, they are the ones who have begun to understand the gospel and make it come alive in the world.

I will finish with a few words from Leslie Brandt's *Go and wash feet*. As I read it, keep in mind the context of Jesus' service — that world of political unrest, oppression, poverty and injustice.

*I am born to be a servant.*

*If I am truly to serve Christ, I may have to begin by washing another's feet, by engaging in a most humble and unspiritual act of loving service to the person closest to me or the neighbour next door.*

*If I refuse to be a servant, I shall live and die as a slave, a slave to self-centredness,*

*from which I have never allowed Christ to set me free.*

*I have claimed his redeeming power for that purpose.*

*If I am truly to discover that freedom,*

*I must act as a creature of freedom,*

*as one who has been set free in order to live for others.*