

He Took A Towel

Maundy Thursday Meditation

Then he poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which he was girded.

(John 13:5, RSV)

He took a towel and washed their dusty feet.
An ordinary, routine act of hospitality,
customary for that time and place,
an act that bore within itself the message
of a warm and friendly greeting and of welcome
to one's guests. And yet an act that was to be
performed not by the host, but by a servant
or a slave, one set there by the door for this task,
one accustomed, don't you see? to appearing
on his bended knees in front of other human beings,
one who might properly and conveniently touch
and wipe and cleanse the body of another
without offense, without the slightest suggestion
there of intimacy, without even being noticed.
In other words one who knew his menial place in life
and could assume it, or so we assume, by instinct.
Shoeshine boy in a land where feet,
not shoes, had to be made to glisten.

He took a towel and washed their dusty feet.
Yet while those feet were being soothed,
refreshed from that long day's weary
and overheated journeying, what turmoil
must have been arising in the minds,
and yes, the souls of those proud Jews,
seeing their teacher, master, hoped-for Savior
kneel before them, each in turn,
and serve them as a slave.

Who should have done the job after all?
That question must have raced across their minds
as they assembled. Was not Judas charged
with money matters, hiring and paying for
necessary servants and the like?
Or what about those two he had already sent ahead
to make all the arrangements for the meal?
Couldn't they be held responsible?
Someone must have slipped up somewhere.
Someone, surely, could have hired a slave or two
instead of creating such an awkward, embarrassing situation.
Or, failing all of this,
someone surely might have volunteered.
Not me of course, with my position in the group,
my dignity to be maintained,
but surely one of the younger ones,
one of the newer ones,
one of the women, perhaps, surely someone. . . .
He took a towel and washed their dusty feet.

He takes a towel and washes our tired feet,
unbinds the cramping cords that rein us in,
removes the awkward leather of protection and display,
the wool for warmth and decency. then wipes
our weary feet to make them cool and fresh and clean.
Can we accept it? That's the question.
Can we discover for ourselves tonight the true humility
and genuine affection that comes from being served
by one we worship and adore?
Can we believe, can we even recognize
the amazing revelation that such a simple,
humble, gentle act will yet expose the very heart
of the Divine? Can we find in all of this a God
who sees the tensions, petty vanities, hostilities
that set us all apart, who knows the self—erected walls

of pride and fear dividing all his children,
a God who realizing we can only be united, brought together
once again by an act of great self-offering and self-denial,
an act of which not one of us is capable,
performs the necessary deed himself,
strips and girding with a towel
says to you and me, “Your feet are tired, child;
take off your shoes and let me soothe them”?

Then, “This is my example” says the Lord,
“As I have done to you, so you must do.”
To wash the weary, dusty; bruised
and bloodied feet of sisters and of brothers,
of the homeless and the hungry. of family and friends,
of our neighbors and our rivals-~
even those whose hands you would not wish to shake.
To wash their weary feet and then to dry them,
gentle now, with your own garment,
then finally to welcome and to seat them,
every hungry, hurting, lost and lonely child of God,
to seat them cleansed, forgiven, loved,
restored around a table that is spread,
around this holy table where the Lord of all
reigns at his royal feast.

So let us learn to greet our neighbor with the touch
of peace, the touch that cleanses, soothes,
refreshes, and brings life since it is the peace of God
we pass and not our own.

Let us turn to one another in the Lord,
and thus turning become partners,
welcome partners for the feast he has prepared;
the feast at which, so long ago,
he took a towel and washed their dusty feet.