

Maundy Thursday - 9 April 2009  
By Reverend Susanna Pain

'You will never wash my feet'  
my clean shod feet.  
You will never wash my feet  
partitioned safely from the earth.  
You will never wash my feet.

When was the last time anyone washed you? Was it when you were in love and you showered together soaping each other's body with laughter and kisses, or soaking in a warm bath together?

Was it when you were ill in hospital, and such a comfort and relief to be washed in bed? Or was it beyond memory when you were a child?

Washing is almost the first thing that happens when you are born, and after you die.  
(inspired by *Narratives and Passions Words for Transformation*, Martin Smith SSIE Darton, Longman and Todd 1996)

'You will never wash my feet:'

'It's not about you – for once it's not about you, it's about me'

Jesus might have said: 'I need to wash your feet. You are my friend. Let me do this for you.'

I shrink back. My feet have always been sensitive, and I am sensitive (despite my prickly exterior). Exposing myself before him, making myself vulnerable before the one I serve – I don't know. 'Yet', he says, 'Unless I wash you, you have no share with me'.

I didn't realize it was that important. My heart stops – 'okay, wash all of me' 'all of me' 'I want to be part of you, part of this – I just don't want to be vulnerable. It's too hard'

What's going on here? There's obviously more than meets the eye. The whole evening is charged with meaning, symbol, emotion.

'Do you know what I have done to you?' He starts to wash our feet, and still I am unable to receive his love – I, who am strong outspoken, will defend him to the end. I am ruffled. What do you want from me?

Do you know what I have done to you? The words of the hymn echo in my mind.

*'Brother, sister let me serve you  
let me be as Christ to you  
pray that I may have the grace  
to let you be my servant too.'*

What a strange and wonderful God. You call me to be your hands and feet. You call me to serve, but this ministry is to be one of equality, mutuality – I must allow myself to be served.

We cannot get away with anything. We are accountable to each other. In each other we find God. ‘Whenever you did it to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it for/to me’.

Indeed, perhaps it is impossible to grow unless we rub shoulders with others, face challenging relationships, loving relationships, needy relationships – in these we God, and are Godded.

It is Maundy Thursday. The day before the end – Jesus death – and the beginning. Jesus shares a meal with his closest friends. John’s gospel doesn’t mention the inauguration of the Eucharist. For him it is symbolized in the washing of the feet – the outpouring of love – as in Baptism.

Martin Smith reflects:

*‘Baptism is an event that is done to us. No one can baptize himself or herself. Baptism is done to us to convey what Christ did to us while we were yet helpless. Christ crucified and risen has given birth to us to our new selves, reconciled to the God of love. Christ has washed and healed us of guilt. Christ has freely taken us to himself in an intimacy without shame, a new naked innocence of prayer and closeness, he is in us and we in him, which re grounds our life in unconditional love’*

(p 145 Narratives and Passions – words for transformation by Martin L Smith SSJE Dorton, Longman & Todd, London, 1996)

In the Eucharist is the renewal, the refreshing, as often as we receive.

It is Maundy Thursday. Jesus shares a meal with his closest friends.

How the air is charged. His betrayer, betrayers, sit beside him and eat.  
He sees into their hearts and grieves.

So much love is present here tonight; so much fear, so much potential to be good and evil, to love and hate.

He sits among them, among us, and washes our feet. Nothing like this act to bring us to earth, to bring us to the present. Human touch, tenderness, caring. Tensions melt, a little. We relax, cocooned in the space, this room, his presence.

Then he breaks the bread

‘this is my body.’

The wine,

‘this is my blood.’

Familiar acts transformed.

Do this to remember me.

So carnal.

We are hushed. We eat. We drink - unanswered questions silent on our lips.

We are washed

We eat, we drink. We are fed, nourished, nurtured, loved.

‘Do you know what I have done to you?’

*‘Tonight when you have fed on Christ in the bread and the cup, look down at him at your feet, and hear him ask you, ‘Do you know what I have done to you?’ Do not hide behind silence. Answer him. Tell him what you know.*

*‘Christ, I know what you have done to me today, what you do to me week by week. In this holy eating and drinking you re-enter the bloodstream of my being, you unite yourself afresh with me. You nourish what is needy in me, you cleanse what is soiled, you embrace back to life my innermost self that halts and falters on its journey to fullness. You have given me yourself, and so, being found again inseparable from you, I find myself in God and with God, where I belong’, (p 146 Smith)*  
on this Maundy Thursday at Holy Covenant.