Maundy Thursday

Year B

I’ve gone around and around on Maundy Thursday. I have worshipped in places where a Christian Seder was held as a sort of prelude to the Maundy Thursday Rite in our Book of Common Prayer, even where our rather anemic Seder misrepresentation completely replaced the Episcopal Rite. Then there have been Maundy Thursdays where the emphasis was leaning so vehemently towards Celebration of the First Eucharist that not only were vestments and altar hangings white, but the *Gloria in excelsis* was sung and *Alleluias* came out from their hiding places. And lest I forget those Holy Thursdays when word got out that everyone was expected to have their feet washed by the rector……. Talk about hiding places! This is an occasion, not unlike Palm Sunday, with an identity crisis: is the Last Supper the First Supper with a different denominational label? how can the humiliating anticipation of having someone see and touch my crooked and probably smelly toes put my thoughts in a suitably worshipful state of mind? how can the Son of God be my focus as a member of the altar guild if I’m worried about the clatter of stainless steel when someone kicks over the bowl of water and are we sure there are enough towels?

As we have all surely been told through the years, the word *maundy* comes from the Latin for command, or *mandate.* My initial exploration of Google told me that the command is to wash each other’s feet! Perhaps not directly: I bring you a new commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. That’s what we are commanded to do: you must love one another so much that you would be willing to do anything to show your love, to show that you matter more than I do. Perhaps that’s why we have some problems with the foot-washing: is making the person you are showing love for supposed to feel humiliated and uncomfortable? isn’t it you – the foot-washer - who is supposed to be lowering the dial on your self-esteem?

Love your neighbor as yourself. The second greatest commandment.

They’ve been around forever: Deuteronomy 6:4-5: Hear O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Leviticus 19:18: you shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself. And Jesus came to clarify: you will not just pay lip service to loving the Lord your God, but you will be willing to sell your belongings, quit your job, lose your friends, leave your family to live the love of the Lord God. And the same goes for your neighbor; and your neighbor is NOT just a member of your tribe, a person who agrees with you, a particularly loveable person. Your neighbor is everywhere, everyone, every man, every woman, every child, creatures of the forest, the sea, the sky – all of Creation. We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord.

So let us observe Maundy Thursday, rather, as the first of the three days when the earth stood still. Jesus – the Son of God – has lived among us as the human manifestation of God: he’s experienced all the goods and bads of the human condition, seen the best of us at our worst, the worst of us at our best; he’s celebrated with us in our joys, wept with us in our sorrows. As Jesus approaches the final hours of his human-ness, he feels the profound loneliness of desertion and betrayal, and the excruciating physical pain of nails being driven into his body in preparation for becoming one with an instrument of torture.

And then, it is finished.

This evening’s Eucharist coupled with the story of Jesus’ Passion then, are not much by way of celebration; it is instead a thanksgiving for how far Jesus had to go to bring us to the place we will find ourselves on Easter Day. Let us think on his suffering for us as we receive the Bread and Wine this holy night, this night that is different from all other nights, this Eucharist that is different from all other Eucharists. Our keeping vigil, our waiting begins as we help strip the altar tonight, as we extinguish candles, as we pray the prayers of Good Friday and help to carry Jesus’ cross, as we remind ourselves of our history as children of God in the readings of the Easter Vigil.

And let us come together on Sunday to greet the Risen Lord.