

HOLY THURSDAY REFLECTION

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Exod 12:1-8, 11-14; 1 Cor 11:23-26; John 13:1-15



A man on his knees with a towel wrapped round his waist and a jug and basin in his hands. I think this is the most powerful image this evening because it is the most unexpected. In this three-day celebration of the victory of life over death our attention is drawn to the feet of the Twelve. In 2016 Pope Francis went to the Centre for Asylum Seekers at Castelnuovo Porto just north of Rome and washed the feet of a group of refugees, Christian and non-Christian, women and men. It made it onto the news media because it too was so unexpected. Here was the bishop of Rome celebrating the Holy Thursday evening liturgy not in the splendour of St Peter's Basilica but in a detention centre. Journalists saw Francis' gesture as having a political message for Europe's leaders in a time when the treatment of asylum seekers had been (and continues to be) a political issue. In his comments, though, Francis did not dwell on the political; just the symbolic and human. He said that he was there to serve, and that the gesture of washing feet was a gesture of solidarity and unity to show that people of diverse backgrounds and cultures can be one.

We can imagine what the feet of the Twelve were like—broad, flat, cracked and split, scaly, hard, calloused, and dry. The wear and tear of life had toughened them. These were feet that had never been pedicured, massaged with moisturiser, or exfoliated with some electric skin remover. Can you imagine what they smelt like? Before them knelt a man, holding and touching, washing and drying, rubbing and massaging their feet. It was a gesture of hospitality and acceptance. Even though Peter was embarrassed at the idea, in the end he invited Jesus to wash his whole body clean. Indeed, we are washed clean in the waters of baptism.

Tonight we pray, like Origen, the third-century Egyptian Christian and biblical commentator, that in these three holiest days of the year, Jesus will come again and wash us clean. Tonight we invite Jesus once again to take care of our needs, to rub away the weariness and tiredness, the aches and pains of our lives. In a homily on the prophet Isaiah, which survives in St Jerome's Latin translation, Origen said, 'Who then cleanses me? Who washes my feet? Come, Jesus, I have filthy feet, become a slave on my behalf, put water in your basin; come, wash my feet'. [In Isaiam homilia 5. The excerpts from the translations of Origen's homilies on Isaiah come from Jerome, Commentary on Isaiah including St Jerome's Translation of Origen Homilies 1-9 on Isaiah, trans. Thomas P. Scheck, Ancient Christian Writers, vol. 68 (New York: Newman, 2015).]

If that were all it meant it would be enough, but there's more. The washing of feet is a sacrament of ministry, a sacrament of leadership. Washing feet is a symbol of authority in the church. Ministry is service. Those in positions of leadership must wash the feet of their parishioners, not only on Holy Thursday but every day. 'You should wash each other's feet', Jesus says to everyone who seeks to be a leader. Leadership is service. In another homily on Isaiah, Origen tells us how that is done: 'But if you understand the things that are written, who the truly blessed bishops are, serving the church, they pour water from the Scriptures into the basin of the soul, which is according to the Scriptures; and they attempt to wash, cleanse, and cast off the dirt from the feet of the disciples'. (In Isaiam homilia 6)

It extends even beyond that. If you are baptised you are called to be a minister of Jesus. To be Christian is to wash the feet of others. The service you are called to offer happens in the everyday reality of life. Do you wash the feet of family and friends, of workmates and neighbours? Something in us dies when we get down on our knees. Maybe it's our pride, maybe it's our self-centredness. Something in us comes to birth when we get down on our knees. Maybe it's our love, maybe it's our care.

We thank God that the people of Israel passed over from slavery to freedom. We thank God that Jesus passed over from death to life. We thank God that we pass over from the filth of sin to the cleanliness of grace, that we pass over from indifference and neglect to love and service. This three-day festival is a passing over. Bread and wine are the symbols of his passing over and of our passing over. Bread is broken to nourish life, to strengthen us to get down on our knees. Wine is poured out to nourish life, to strengthen us to get down on our knees. We give ourselves in service in thanksgiving for the one who gave himself in service to us. The service we give nourishes life. It costs us time and energy, sweat and tears, but it is what we do if we are followers of Jesus, nourished by word and sacrament. As we share in this eucharist may we become what we receive, may we wash the feet of those just as we were washed by him.