



# Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers  
From the clergy and members  
of Holy Trinity Church  
Forbes Park, Makati

Date: 08 April 2004 Maundy Thursday  
Title: **"Feet, Meat and the Street"**  
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## Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Exodus 12:1-14a  
Second Reading 1 Corinthians 11:23-26  
Gospel John 13:1-15

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Clergy in the Episcopal Church don't always assign titles to our sermons, unlike those of other denominations who display theirs on the church signs (like the notorious one: "What is hell like?" which unfortunately was followed on the sign by the suggestion, "Come hear our choir."). If I *were* to title tonight's one, though, it might be:

*"The Feet, the Meat, and the Street."*

First the Feet. The rite of the washing of the feet is both very ancient and very new. It has only featured in an edition of the Book of Common Prayer since 1976, but it goes way back. It used to be performed in the Middle Ages by the monarch who would wash the feet of twelve poor people every year and then give them some money. This "Maundy" is still given by the Queen of England, but I don't think she has to wash any feet.

In church circles, this washing of the feet disappeared in most places. Even though Jesus seems to be telling us to do it at least as often as we celebrate Holy Communion, this symbolic act came to be observed only in monasteries and some cathedrals, and only once a year, today, Maundy Thursday.

The exception was the Celtic monastic tradition where the significance of this act of humility was considered important enough that it was reenacted at various times throughout the year when the brethren of the monastery washed each other's feet in response to the command of our Lord. They considered it a sacrament.

Another place where this rite of foot washing was retained even until today was in Jerusalem, where the Orthodox community observes it every year. There, the symbolism is heightened by the custom that each order of ordained ministry, beginning with the Patriarch and on down, wears the vestments appropriate to the next order down: bishops dress as priests, priests as deacons, deacons as subdeacons, and so on. This quite literally takes everybody "down a notch" as they wash each other's feet.

But what, finally, is the purpose of this dramatic, but also rather theatrical gesture? The point is Jesus' teaching that we must show our love for one another by serving each other and providing for each other's needs. This can be done, of course, without having one's feet literally washed, or indeed washing feet one's self. But as is the case with so many other demonstrations of affection, this brings the point home: only in service, in humility, will we find the true meaning of what Jesus was all about.

We won't really "get" Easter unless we go through the experience of today and tomorrow, and that's why our church continues to keep all of the rites and rituals of these three holy days, however modest our congregations might be. I sometimes feel sorry for people who only turn up for Easter morning. Do they realize what's been going on? Is it all flowers candles for them, or worse- the last-gasp celebration of a pagan myth of spring's return "dressed up" to look Christian? Bunnies and eggs don't really help that, do they?

There's something much, much deeper than that, and it starts with voluntarily undergoing some kind of act of humility; not *humiliation*, but *humility*, and a humility

tied to service and love as we are “taken down a notch” in order to rediscover who we are meant to be.

The second aspect of tonight’s observe is the “Meat” part; meat spelled m-e-a-t and signifying not beef or pork, but food in general and particularly that which we are going to partake of in Holy Communion. Of course, this is something that we do every Sunday, if not more often. The Eucharist has been the main act of worship for this congregation for many years now. But on Maundy Thursday, we are reenacting it on the night of its original introduction, and that makes it special. Tied to the rite of foot washing, it also makes it part and parcel of the voluntary reinforcement of our service to others.

I have found it very significant when visiting Russian Orthodox churches that, in most cases, the ancient “exchange of the peace”: that greeting or handshake we perform before the offertory, has fallen out of use. However, members of the congregation *will* greet each other with a kiss when they are return from *receiving Communion*. The bond of having become physically reconnected with our Lord Jesus Christ reminds them of that other aspect of the Body of Christ: *the members of the Church*. Those who receive Communion recognize in each other that there is something different about them, something intimately associated to Christ himself.

In his letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul warns that some of the congregation he’s writing to have become sick or even died because of not “discerning the body” when they celebrate the Eucharist. Paul’s warning is not just about pretending that this is just ordinary wafers and cheap imported wine. That’s *part* of it, of course. But what even non-sacramental Protestants affirm is significant for us, too: We must also discern the Body *in each other* or we risk missing Jesus’ point, thereby missing Jesus himself when he is present for us in *those around us*: the folks whose feet we wash either physically or else symbolically in the way we treat them.

And the last point of my sermon title would be “the Street,” by which I mean the world outside these walls, outside Forbes Park, or Makati or Manila or even the Philippines, but most of all just outside of ourselves. Everything we do here tonight is

meant to transform that Outer World and to make it a little more like what God had in mind when He made it. That is part of the purpose of the Church. But I would also like to suggest something that risks being misinterpreted as exclusivist or cliquish. But I hope it's not.

There are occasions when the family needs to be alone. They occur in the friendliest and most outgoing of families. They occurred even in the circle around our Lord when he needed to be apart with the disciples on a mountaintop or on the lake in order to periodically recharge. The Jewish celebration of the seder, the Passover Meal that is being celebrated by our religious forebears this week is usually a private family affair, and Jesus' own reenactment of it in the Last Supper wasn't a feeding of the 5,000, but an intimate dinner for thirteen. The ministry to the world would continue, but not just then.

Tonight is "our night" a time for the family. The rest of the triduum, the 3 Holy Days will be for the world at large, but this is meant to "discern the body" and to celebrate it. Then, when we are sure who we are and what we are doing, we can start to invite others to join and share both the mystery and the ministry.

So our celebration now continues: our keeping of the rites of service, of breaking of bread, and of recollection. May it be for us as significant as that first observance so many years ago when Christ first did with his friends what we do here. On that night, the youngest in the group would have asked the ritual question, "What makes this night different from all other nights?" May we, who keep the presence of the Lord alive in the world by following his commands, know the right answers: that it has something to do with *servicing* others, and of ourselves *being served*; of *Christ's Body and Blood* as our food along the way; and of the importance of times of looking *inward* as a family in order that when we look *out* towards others, we know why.