

Maundy Thursday
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The Gospel of John chapter 13: v.2-5: “Jesus girded himself with a towel and began to wash his disciples’ feet”. There was a quaint handbook on church needlework, published in the 1950’s with altar guilds in mind telling them what to do. And when it came to the lavabo towel, it said something like -- “the length of the lavabo towel should be twelve inches for Roman Catholics and eighteen inches for Anglicans, which provoked the late S.J. Forest to write a comic poem that began “O filthy dirty Anglican needing the larger towel”. I’ve been very struck since I came to Portland to see how the dedication to the holy cross is often associated with ministry with the poor and marginalized. And this has been true in Britain also. In the late fifties and early sixties as a student I worked with the late Father George Potter, who founded the Brotherhood of the Holy Cross DHC, the smallest of all the Franciscan Orders in the Church of England, although Father Potter was one of the largest clergymen in the Church of England. But the symbol of the Brotherhood of the Holy Cross was a large dirty towel and Potter held that if we were meant to minister, if we were going to minister adequately to people the towel needed to be bigger and bigger. O dirty filthy Anglican needing the larger towel. If we are to minister as God wills us to, the towel will need to be large. Now I mention this partly because as you know in the Gospel of John there is no account of the institution of the Eucharist. It is replaced by the washing of feet and I’ve often wondered what Christian liturgy and Christianity as a whole would have been like had Christian worship revolved around feet washing rather than bread breaking. Today would we be arguing about whether the left foot should be washed before the right foot; would we be arguing about whether total immersion of the foot was necessary or whether pouring or even sprinkling would do or whether women’s feet could be washed at all. And even more seriously, whether women could wash feet. The trouble with speculation on these grounds is that they turn out sadly to be true somewhere. No sooner had I said this many years ago, that I read in The National Catholic Reporter that the Roman Catholic Bishop of Pittsburg had banned the washing of women’s feet. That was bad enough, but then a friend said – and I didn’t believe him at first -- I thought he was joking, but he was deadly serious – that he had been driving through Tennessee I think or it might have been Kentucky and he saw a church and it was

called "The Left-footed Baptist Church and he was rather puzzled by this, but since there was a man digging the garden he stopped the car and asked him what it meant. The man said "We wash feet at every service and we regard this as essential to worship, but we always wash the left foot first and sadly a pastor was appointed who started washing the right foot before the left foot and it caused a split in the congregation and half of the people left. You will find the right-footed Baptist Church about a mile and a half down the road. I checked this and it turned out to be true. But this is to miss the point – to miss the point – so that ritual becomes an end in itself rather than the means to the hallowing of the world. Just as we all need to become Eucharist persons – walking sacraments of God's love in the world carrying the body and blood of Christ around with us wherever we go, so we need to see the washing of feet as not simply a rite and a ceremony, but something which needs to embody our whole spirituality and our whole pastoral ministry. What is this feet washing? What does it mean? What kind of ministry is it? Well I think first of all it is a lowly ministry. In order to wash feet you need to bend low or kneel down. It's a lowly ministry. St. Gregory of Nyssa in the fourth century said that God's nature was more clearly revealed in his lowliness than it was in all his wonders. The washing of feet is a lowly ministry, but it's also a human ministry. Much of our liturgy and much of our ministry has somehow become less than human. I often used to worry when people were beginning to be ordained to the diaconate and the priesthood that they would lose their humanity. Fortunately many didn't and yet it's very easy to hide behind the clerical persona. It's very easy for lay people to become respectable Christians who don't seem to have kept their humanity and we need to remember and the foot washing should remind us that we are human before we are Christians. Only a human person can become a Christian person just as "the word was made flesh; so we are flesh before we are sanctified by God's grace. And the feet washing too is a dirty ministry – it's messy. My colleague at St Bothell's in east London, Pat Wright, was a Vocational Deacon, but she spent most of her life as a nurse and a good deal of it both in England and in Africa ministering to people with HIV and Aids and training nurses for that important ministry and she talked frequently about how important feet washing was both in the nursing profession and in her understanding of what it was to be a Deacon. But feet washing is important in being a Christian and Christians are often afraid of getting their hands dirty and probably getting their feet dirty as well. I've been speaking at St. David's Church in the last few days and leading the Stations of the Cross and I've used some stations painted by my dear friend Beverly Bier who is a

British artist and when we got to the Station “Jesus Dies upon the Cross”, all you can see in Beverly’s painting is his feet. The whole painting is dominated by the feet, one of which is very wounded and dirty and bloody, one of which is absolutely clean and whole. Now over the years I’ve come across devotion to the heart of Jesus, to the blood of Jesus, to the wounds of Jesus, to the body of Jesus, but never to the feet of Jesus and yet the feet are so important because the feet enable us to move. In one of his best sermons Augustine says we sing Alleluia here on earth in the midst of pain and tribulation, but in heaven we will sing it gloriously in the midst of splendor, but on earth we must sing Alleluia and keep on walking and the last word, the last sentence of the sermon is “sing Alleluia! and keep on walking” and we need to keep on walking. So the feet washing is a dirty ministry; we will get our hands dirty; we will get our feet dirty. It’s a silent ministry, it’s done in silence; it’s not an excuse for evangelism or a way of gaining converts although that may well happen, but it’s a silent contemplative ministry. And people are often brought to Christian faith not by anything which is said from a pulpit or anywhere else, but from the example of Christians that they encounter. And feet washing is a cleansing ministry. The purpose of feet washing is that the feet shall be made clean. This emphasis on silence and cleansing brings it home to us that there is nothing else behind it, there is no ulterior motive. Feet are washed because feet need to be washed, but in entering the mystery of the feet washing, which in some churches does take place every week in the context of the Eucharist. A lot of my friends in the black Pentecostal Churches in Briton whenever they celebrate the Eucharist, they have the foot washing and they say Jesus told us to do this “in remembrance of me”, but he also told us “wash one another’s feet and whenever we do one, we do the other also. In celebrating this mystery of the washing of feet we are entering into and coming very close to the central mystery of our faith. The Maundy Thursday Liturgy brings us close to passion, suffering, death, descent into hell and resurrection and this three day liturgy, this credum is really one liturgy, one extended liturgy which culminates in the Alleluias at the Easter Vigil and then the fifty days of the Pascal Season follow the most important season of the Christian year and a microcosm of all our worship, which is why your Book of Common Prayer is absolutely right in putting the celebration of the Easter Vigil and of Easter at the very heart of the book and everything else flows from it. And the key word in the Easter Vigil is the word “Alleluia!” which returns after forty days of absence. The late Father Hasting Slide who worked in Cambridge, Massachusetts died on Holy Saturday in the late sixties and he’d been in a coma for a while and he would wake up and shout instructions

to the members of his community about things that he'd remembered, and then he would go back to sleep again and then he would wake up again and shout more instructions and finally he sat up in bed with his eyes wide open and in a very loud voice he shouted "and don't forget the Alleluias!" and with those words he died. Famous last words! So we sing Alleluia and keep our walking and on this journey we walk with our feet; we know no other way to walk and so these feet, the feet of Jesus, our feet are terribly important. Our ministry is a walking ministry, a moving ministry, a ministry which is constantly making progress and this is what the foot washing is all about. Amen