

St Mary-le-Bow, Cheapside, London EC2V 6AU  
**High Mass of the Lord's Supper with washing of feet**  
Dan Warnke, Parish Ordinand  
Thursday 29th March 2018 at 1.05pm

*John 13: 1-17, 31b-35*

I wonder what you think about dying? I remember being 24, newly married and asked if I had a Will. I must admit it made no sense to me at the time. Aside from the fact that my only possession of any note was a surf canoe (of which my new bride certainly had no interest!), I was young and so writing a Will seemed a little pointless. Of course things have changed, I've changed, and life has taken on complications that mean should things end sooner than I think, a Will would at least help in the face of my unexpected departure. And that's the point; my end is not in my sights, it's not something I can know, or control.

I would imagine that not many of us relish the idea of preparing for death, yet we began this season of Lent with ash, ash that reminds us we all have an end, that we are mortal and temporal creatures. And as this ash marks the sign of the cross on our forehead, we hear the words: "From dust you came and to dust you shall return, turn from sin and be faithful to Christ". You might be worried about the future, you may not know what lies ahead, but one thing is for certain: you will, at some point, die. So how might we respond?

In our Gospel reading today we hear what seems like strange speech. Talk of death, of washing feet, and loving service. Jesus meets with his disciples the night before he dies, takes off his outer robe, wraps a towel around himself and starts washing their feet. But what we need to remember is that all this fits within a bigger story, the Gospels come to us in narrative for a reason. The whole of the liturgical year (the seasons of the church) assume that this week, Holy Week, plays a prominent role in this narrative. Like the key scene of a film, foot washing on Maundy Thursday is when the central drama of Christian imagination is ignited. The theologian David Ford calls this the prophetic drama: actions that Jesus beckons us to repeat. Jesus is about to leave this world, and prays that his disciples might also know that they are not of this world. The question for us is: how does this foot washing fit within the story of God, and where do we feature in this scene?

One perspective is to say we that believe in Jesus, then live the lives we wanted to live anyway, free from any worry about what happens to us when we die, because, you know, we believe in the 'big guy upstairs' who's looking out for us. Jesus doesn't really make too many demands, so long as we try to stay true to our word, and play fair. We read this story about foot washing, and conclude that it's good to be humble, it's good to help those who've had a tough time, or serve at the homeless shelter, or give something back to

society. And with this philosophy of service in mind, Jesus doesn't interrupt our lives too much, quite the opposite, he affirms them. Our way of accepting the crucified Christ, then, is to show some gratitude and humility from time-to-time, giving a little back to those less fortunate, as we get down on our knees to wash the odd foot now and again (metaphorically of course). It sounds ok, and it sounds like what any decent person might do, but I'm not sure it sounds like the Gospel.

An alternative view takes into account the previous chapter, where Mary of Bethany gets down on her knees and washes Jesus' feet; only she does it with perfume, using her hair. This was utterly scandalous, but Jesus defends her because she was the only one who realised he was about to die. She was the only one preparing him for burial. So when Jesus gets on his knees and starts washing the disciples feet, the act takes on new meaning. Peter refuses because he thinks it's beneath Jesus, who simply responds: "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me". Essentially, "unless you are willing to die, you can't expect to share in my risen life. Mary prepared me, now I'm preparing you".

This kind of foot washing, then, is preparation for our death. Not in fright, but death illuminated by the light of baptism, when the dark shadow of mortality ceases to rule our minds and drive our fears. What we see in this kind of foot washing is not simply humble service, feeling spiritual, or being a bit religious, but Jesus beckoning his disciples (and in turn us) into his vision of the world, a world in which preparing one another for death becomes more than making a Will, but rather, follows a new commandment; to serve and 'love one another'.