

Sermon
Maundy Thursday
March 28th, 2024
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa
The Reverend Victoria Scott

At the beginning of this week, on Palm/Passion Sunday, I spoke of the movement – the rhythm – that Holy Week offers us. A sacred rhythm of dying, burial, and resurrection. We began with the jubilation of Jesus’s entry into Jerusalem – a hum and pulse of celebration – held in tension with the cadence of crisis that we know is coming as Jesus continues to Jerusalem, facing suffering and death on the cross.

We move closer to that crisis tonight. Closer to the cross. Before that, though, this night: Maundy Thursday. This is night when we hear from John’s Gospel that Jesus washed the feet of his disciples as they shared a meal. A night when Jesus gave the disciples a new “mandate” - a new commandment – that they love one another as he had loved them. In the midst of turmoil, knowing that more turmoil and anguish was to come, Jesus immersed himself in a rhythm of love and community with the disciples.

They gathered to eat and drink together, and Jesus, with bread and wine, made a new covenant. In that bread and wine there was – there is! – life, and love. There is a pulse – a heartbeat – of love that we are invited to remember, to feel pulsing through our veins whenever we share in the Eucharist. That pulse, that heartbeat of love sustains us in the rhythm of dying, burial and resurrection that we are invited into in our spiritual lives.

This night offers us a rhythm of love, and a pattern of preparation: preparing to die. With bread and wine, broken and shared in love, Jesus is preparing the disciples to die. In washing their feet, Jesus is preparing them to die. He is preparing them to die to all that inhibits the living out of the mandate – the command – to love one another as he has loved them.

In his book “Mere Christianity”, C.S. Lewis said this: “Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead...”. Earlier in Lent we heard that unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies it will not bear fruit. Richard Rohr frames this as distinguishing between the true self and the false self. If we are

willing to have the characteristics of our false self – hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, jealousy, judgement, power, control – die, we find Christ in us. What is raised is our true self.

Jesus was prepared as Richard Rohr says “...to become the crucified so that we will stop crucifying.” The question for us is: Are we prepared? Are we prepared to love to the end? Are we prepared to die to the self-centered parts of our humanity that cling to power and status and control? Are we prepared to die to the parts of ourselves that limit or inhibit God’s love?

In a few minutes, we’ll share in the ritual of foot-washing. Feel in it a rhythm of preparation. With the sound of water, and as it flows over your feet, know that it is preparing you to die to the parts of yourself that limit or inhibit God’s love. That water washes away barriers. It washes away one-sided power and control. It washes away self-centeredness and selfishness. It prepares us to die to the parts of ourselves that “get in the way” of walking to the beat – a heartbeat of love – that Jesus followed with his footsteps.

This evening draws us into the dark parts of Holy Week. Into the abandonment of Gethsemane. Into betrayal. Into agony and suffering and death. Just as Jesus and the disciples prepared for that together, we prepare, together. Before we make our way to the foot of the cross tomorrow, taste life in our Eucharist. Let it sustain you in what lies ahead. Let it prepare you to die to the things that inhibit God’s love in your life, in yourself. Let it prepare you to discover your truest self. Feel the heartbeat of God, sustaining you through darkness and suffering and death with the promise of life and love, forever made new in Jesus. In his name. Amen.