

On the Night when he was Betrayed

Maundy Thursday

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Exodus 12:1–4, 11–14; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26; John 13:1–17, 31b–35

Open our ears, O Lord, to hear your word.

Open our eyes to see your face.

Be gracious to us and help us,

that we might know you, love you, and serve you,

today and every day.

Amen

‘On the night when he was betrayed.’

That’s how his disciples came to think of this night:

as the night when Jesus was betrayed.

That's what Paul calls it, writing to the church in Corinth
some twenty years later:

'the night when he was betrayed'.

Not 'the night when he first gave us his body and blood'.

Not 'the night when he was arrested, and tried'.

Not 'the night when his passion began'.

No. The night when he was *betrayed*.

That's how this night stayed cut into their memory,
a scar never fully healed.

This was the night when Jesus had taught them
how wide and deep was his love,
how wide and deep their love should be –
but it was the night when that love was *sold*.

The story of that night is familiar to us.

Part of it – the part that begins,
‘the Lord Jesus, on the night when he was betrayed
took a loaf of bread,
and when he had given thanks, he broke it...’

– that may be the story told most often
in the whole of human history.

Tens or hundreds of millions of people are hearing it tonight,
all around the world.

And it’s a story *we* know through and through.

But I want to draw your attention again to two small elements of it
related to that betrayal around which the story pivots,
and to the foot-washing that preceded it.

The first things I want you to notice are
the feet that Jesus washed. And I want you to ask,
‘*Whose* feet were washed?’

Jesus ‘poured water into a basin’, John tells us
and began to wash *the disciples’* feet’.

But he doesn't tell us *which* disciples.

It may just mean the twelve; it may mean a wider selection
from the women and men who were following Jesus;
we don't know; we don't know who was there.

We are told, of course, that Simon Peter was there,

Simon Peter who said to Jesus in horror,

'Lord, are *you* going to wash my feet?'

And we'll be coming back to him.

But the other disciple whose name we are given,

the other disciple we know to have been there –

well, *it's Judas Iscariot.*

He's mentioned just before the foot-washing begins,

and he's mentioned a little later,

when he leaves to carry out his betrayal.

And that means that, in between, he's here,

in the group of disciples having their feet washed by Jesus.

Jesus, knowing what is in Judas' heart,

knowing what he plans to do,

washes Judas' feet.

He knows where those feet are about to take Judas;
he knows where Judas' steps will lead –
and yet he washes him,
with water that he has poured into a basin,
and he dries him,
with the towel that he has tied around his waist.

It almost seems that the evangelist,
the one who wrote this story down for us,
is embarrassed by this.

Look at how the passage begins.

‘Now before the festival of the Passover,
Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world
and go to the Father.

Having loved his own who were in the world,
he loved them to the end.

*The devil had already put it into the heart of
Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him.*

And during supper Jesus,
knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands,
and that he had come from God and was going to God,
got up from the table, took off his outer robe,
and tied a towel around himself.' ...

It would read much more smoothly
without that verse about Judas in the middle.

It is as if the writer, knowing that this is an act
in which Jesus pours out his love for his disciples,
in which Jesus wraps his disciples in his love and holds them,
can't quite bring himself to say directly that
Jesus poured out his love for his betrayer too,
wrapped his betrayer, too, in his love.

The writer knows that Judas is there,
but he only mentions him in order to
separate him from the rest,
to mark him out as the betrayer.

But *Jesus washes Judas' feet.*

Just as he will share the bread and wine,
his body and blood, with Judas too.

Jesus carries on including Judas
in the circle of those he calls his own.

Jesus will not turn his face away
from the one who is turning away from him.

He will not turn his face away
from the one who is about to turn him over
into the hands of those who hate him.

Jesus is *never* the one who turns away –
though Judas is turning,
and will turn this night all the way away from his Lord,
his friend,
the one who shared his life with him and loved him,
the one who washed his feet.

Jesus is not the one who turns away.

We turn away.

We all turn away.

But Jesus is not the one who turns his face away from us.

Jesus will never refuse to wash our feet.

Jesus will never refuse to touch us.

Jesus will never refuse to share himself with us.

Jesus is never the one who turns away – not even from Judas.

All this took place ‘on the night when he was betrayed’.

On the night when Judas closed the deal,
when he led the soldiers to where Jesus was hiding,
when he helped them capture Jesus,
safely away from surrounding crowds
who might otherwise have risen in insurrection.

‘On the night when he was betrayed.’

But Judas is not the only betrayer in the story.

And this is the second thing I want you to notice.

It is perhaps not *Judas*' betrayal –
or, at least, not Judas' betrayal *alone* –
that made the disciples remember this night in those terms.

Because they *all* betrayed Jesus that night.

They fled.

They left him.

They denied him.

Even Peter, who seemed the strongest –
who thought himself the strongest.

'On the night when Jesus was betrayed' ...
by Judas, by Peter, by all of his disciples.

Peter is the other one who we know had his feet washed by Jesus.

And John tells us that at first he refused –
and that Jesus had to rebuke Peter
before he could wash him.

Peter protested, but Jesus answered him:

'You do not know now what I am doing,
but later you will understand.'

Peter did not yet understand.

And the seed of Peter's betrayal –
of the drama that will be played out later, in the courtyard,
before the cock crows –
the seed of that betrayal is already audible,
right here in Peter's refusal to be washed –
because he did not yet know what Jesus was doing.

He would not accept that Jesus would crouch down,
touch Peter's feet,
make himself Peter's servant,
take up the posture of a slave.

Peter's Jesus would not, *could* not do that.

His Jesus is about strength and glory,
a Jesus to follow with extravagant gestures
and bold declarations.

Not a Jesus who kneels down.

Not a Jesus holding a towel.

Not a Jesus who washes feet.

And not a Jesus who lets himself be taken,
not a Jesus who will fall under the turning wheel
of brutal Roman justice, of provincial politics,
of religious expediency.

Not a Jesus who can be crushed,
not a Jesus who can die.

Peter refuses to be washed for the same reason
that he will later refuse to admit that
he is one of Jesus' followers –
because he does not understand
Jesus' *refusal* of strength and glory.

He does not understand Jesus' love.

Peter, even Peter, turns his face away from Jesus –
but Jesus still washes his feet, like he washes Judas.

On the night when Jesus was betrayed –
he was betrayed by Judas, he was betrayed by Peter,
he was betrayed by all those whom he loved.

And yet Jesus washed the feet of all of them,
loving them to the end.

Jesus is not the one who turns away.

We turn away.

We *all* turn away.

Like Peter, we turn away whenever we think that Jesus
stands most with those in power,
those who are at the front,
those who are visible, or authoritative, or eloquent.

We turn away whenever we forget that
Jesus stands with those who serve –
those who clean, who make the drinks,
who seem to be on the edges
who don't feel like they belong.

We turn away whenever we deny that
Jesus stands with those who need,
those who cry out,

those who find that they're always the ones done to
and never the ones who do,
those who have to rely on foodbanks, on benefits, on charity;
those who sleep in doorways;
those who are denied visas, denied passage, denied a home;
those who are denied a voice;
those who are denied a place.

Jesus stands, Jesus kneels, Jesus washes and wipes,
with those whom
power and strength brush past.

And when we push from our minds the poor, the weak,
the marginalised, the ordinary
in order to walk with the great and good,
to stand with the worthy, the deserving, the strong,
to sit with the stable, the substantial, the satisfied –
well, we turn away from Jesus.

Jesus is not the one who turns away.

We turn away. *We all* turn away.

On the night when he was betrayed,

all his followers turned away –

but Jesus knew that, Jesus knew *them*,

and still Jesus washed their feet.

He loved them to the end.

We turn away, we all turn away.

But it is never too late to turn back.

There is no ‘point of no return’.

Because Jesus *never* turns away.

Amen