



HOLY WEEK MEDITATIONS: **Thursday**

Exodus 12:1-14; Psalms 116:1-2, 12-19; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17; 31b-35

The focus narrows to the cross as we near the end of Holy Week. The first reading for Maundy Thursday describes the institution of Passover and God's rescue of his people from slavery in Egypt over three millennia ago. They are told to repeat this ceremony so each new generation learns: They couldn't save themselves so God, their redeemer, did. The language of putting a lamb's blood on their door frames is graphic and striking: the blood of an innocent sacrifice meant they were spared death that night. Elements of this, the sprinkling of blood and the eating of the sacrifice, would later be used to consecrate priests (Ex 29; Lev 8).

The reading from 1 Corinthians reminds us that Jesus, two millennia ago, instituted a new rite, bringing to fulfillment the Passover and the prophecy of Jeremiah 31. Repeat and remember: Jesus is the lamb sacrificed for you, sparing you from death.

John gives us one of Jesus' final lessons, possibly prompted by the disciples' bickering about who was the greatest (Lk 27). This lesson was guaranteed to be memorable because the disciples would have been desperately uncomfortable. In Roman and Jewish culture alike the lowest of the servants washed the guests' feet. John's vivid description suggests every detail of this was burned in his memory.

The church has continued the tradition of uncomfortableness ever since. While many churches commemorate this account with foot washing once a year, in my mother-in-law's church they held foot-washings once a month. Think about all those cold, bare feet. Just as we brush and floss just before going to the dental hygienist, now we have to scrub our feet and somehow keep them fresh before that point in the service when we have to take off shoes and socks, and even then, well, when the feet come out, no one is really happy. If, in general, foot washing is not customary or relevant in our temperate climate, hopefully our unease drives home the point: nothing, and certainly not honor or embarrassment or discomfort, should keep us from serving others, and sometimes service will even require those things.

Unlike the Passover and Lord's Supper, Jesus is not primarily instituting a memorial, but commanding action. The command, the *mandatum* from which we get "Maundy" Thursday, is to love one another with a serving love (John 13:34-35). The British monarchs who used to celebrate this day washing the feet of the poor seem to have gotten this point; now they give alms instead. Jesus washed our feet by choosing to die, so that spiritual death with its grinding hopelessness might pass us over. Paul gave up a promising rabbinic career, instead spreading the gospel, one step ahead of those who wanted to beat or kill him. Barbara Thomas of Rochester Family Mission spends her days gathering donated goods for those who can't just shelter in place, or who are now without jobs. *Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them* (John 13:16-17).

-Tim Collins