

Maundy Thursday is for April Fools

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Is it any wonder that since the beginning of the Jesus movement Christians have been suspected of doing strange things when they gather for their sacred rituals?

Cannibalism was the charge leveled against the earliest Christians: “*What do you mean you eat the body and blood of your Lord?*” incredulous civil authorities demanded of those first underground believers. Their understandable horror is lost on us.

This “fellowship meal” that Christians continue to share (sounds so benign, doesn’t it?) is rooted in denial, betrayal, a disciple’s suicide, a Messiah’s death, the body and blood of this crucified Messiah, and . . . dirty feet.

Jesus gave the *mandatum* (from which we derive “Maundy”)—“to wash one another’s feet”—after he showed his disciples how to do it. This act of humility, he said, is not peripheral but integral to life in the reign of God. It is servant leadership learned in the doing of it.

With his enthusiasm characteristically misplaced, Peter wants the full-service wash: “my hands and head also, please!” But Peter’s foolishness provides the opportunity for Jesus to prefigure another friend’s imminent betrayal: “you are clean, though not all of you.”

Peter’s ignorant exuberance. The silent treachery of Judas. This fugitive community gathered for the last meal of a soon-to-be-condemned state criminal. Strange beginnings for a strange community, indeed.

In the midst of misunderstanding and a friend’s double-cross, Jesus sinks down to the lowliest of places to reveal not only the nature of servant leadership in the Kingdom but the very meaning of his death. Into the chaos and confusion of human existence the God of heaven stoops to dwell; into deceit and double-dealing, into the misery, fraud, and loneliness of our small lives—into this and more the Word became

incarnate, and lived among us “full of grace and truth.” And the life he lived led to the death he died.

In a video segment of the popular Bible study, [Jesus in the Gospels](#), South African theologian and Methodist bishop [Peter Storey](#) notes how fond Christians are of saying—especially during Holy Week perhaps—that “God sent Jesus to die on the cross.” But that way of putting it, says Storey, robs Jesus of his humanity, his capacity for moral choice; Jesus, on this view, is little more than a programmed robot, marching passively to a preordained fate.

God sent Jesus into the world not to die, Storey reminds us, but to *love*. And to those who tried to fence his love in, whose empty legalism was exposed, whose very social order was threatened—to those it became clear that to stop his loving they would have to destroy him. And so they did.

But on the night before he died, Jesus spent his love—his profligate, prodigal love—in an act of domestic servitude, washing the feet of his mystified family of followers. This act of love was wasted on a dunce like Peter and a scoundrel like Judas and from this we know that it is wasted, even now, on cons and failures like us.

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