

## SERMON NOTES

Great Thursday  
Washing of the Feet

Synaxis Gospel  
John 13:1-15

### OUR PART WITH THE LORD

#### INTRODUCTION

The Apostle John began recording the last week before the Crucifixion with an account of Jesus' visit to the village of Bethany in the close vicinity of Jerusalem six days before the Passover. Recently, in this village, Jesus had raised His friend, Lazarus, from the dead. The return of Jesus attracted crowds of people to Bethany who wanted to see both Jesus and the resurrected Lazarus.

At a dinner party in Jesus' honor, Mary, the sister of Lazarus, suddenly anointed Jesus' feet with a jar of very expensive ointment. This act irritated Judas Iscariot, who was the treasurer for Jesus and the disciples. Judas objected that the perfume should have been sold and the money given to the poor. But in an editorial comment, John informs us that Judas had been pilfering from the funds under his control, and the comment about the poor was just a smoke-screen for his avarice. According to the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, after Jesus defended Mary's action, Judas decided to betray the Lord to His enemies in Jerusalem for thirty pieces of silver, the price of a slave<sup>1</sup>—only one third the price of Mary's perfume.<sup>2</sup>

If Passover was on Friday evening that year (the Jews always reckoned the day as beginning the evening before), six days before fell on Saturday evening<sup>3</sup> through Sunday evening, or our Palm Sunday. On that day the crowds joyously followed Him to Jerusalem waving Palms and shouting out, "Blessed is He Who comes in the Name of the LORD."

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<sup>1</sup> That Jesus had been sold for the price of a slave, which Jesus knew already as He assumed the position of a slave that last evening, when He washed the disciples' **and Judas'** feet, is amazing. One sees in this humble act on Jesus' part, along with His teaching for the others, a silent appeal to Judas that He knew all and was offering the traitor a chance to repent and be forgiven by the One Who still loved him—even to the uttermost.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 26:14-15 and Mark 14:6-11.

<sup>3</sup> The anointing by Mary occurred that evening; we refer to that Saturday evening as Lazarus Saturday.

After spending a few days teaching in the Temple, Jesus withdrew to spend His last day with His disciples. Thursday evening was the last our Lord spent with His disciples before his crucifixion. It is this eventful evening that we commemorate today.

Our tradition is that Jesus was crucified on Friday and St. John maintains that Jesus was crucified the same day the Passover lambs were being sacrificed. This would have been, then, on Friday in preparation for the Passover supper that evening.

John's position possibly conflicts with the other Gospels<sup>4</sup> that *seem* to support the view that Jesus' last supper on Thursday evening was the Passover meal. However, the Armenian Church simply calls the Thursday evening meal, the Last Supper of the Lord, without reference to the Passover.

## SYNAXIS READING

John 13:1-15

*"Now before the Feast of the Passover, Jesus knowing that His hour had come that He should depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.*

*And during supper, the devil having already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon, to betray Him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God, and was going back to God, rose from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself about.*

*Then He poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded.*

*And so He came to Simon Peter. He said to Him, "Lord, do You wash my feet?"*

*Jesus answered and said to him, "What I do you do not realize now, but you shall understand hereafter."*

*Peter said to Him, "Never shall You wash my feet!" Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me."*

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<sup>4</sup> The seeming discrepancies can be worked out in several ways. See the excursus on this topic in the Appendix.

*Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head," Jesus said to him, "He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you."*

*For He knew the one who was betraying Him; for this reason He said, "Not all of you are clean."*

*And so when He had washed their feet, and taken His garments, and reclined at the table again, He said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you?"*

*You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am.*

*If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you.*

*Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master; neither is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them."*

## NOTES

**“Now before the Feast of the Passover, Jesus knowing that His hour had come that He should depart out of this world to the Father,**

While this is an introductory statement for this entire section of John's Gospel, which includes the suffering and crucifixion of our Lord, the time John marks should be noticed. It was *before* the Feast of the Passover, not *during* the Feast of the Passover. John reinforces his claim that this supper was not the Passover meal as he continues his account of the following morning and day.

Jesus, during His ministry, had often spoken of His hour—that it had not arrived. But here we see that His hour, the time for His death, had finally come, and Jesus knew it. The *hour* meant that Jesus would leave the world and return to His Father.

**having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.**

Continuing the introductory statement of this section, John reverts to terminology he used in the Prologue to his Gospel. There John had written that the Word, the true Light, that came into the world, “came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him.”<sup>5</sup> Despite their negative response,<sup>6</sup> we see that Jesus loved them and loved them utterly (to the end).

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<sup>5</sup> John 1:9-11. But John goes on to say in verse 12, “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His Name.”

<sup>6</sup> Much of humanity has not received Jesus Christ, that is, they have not believed in Him and accepted His work on the Cross.

## And during supper, the devil having already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon, to betray Him,

John does not view this *supper* as the Passover meal, but as a supper preceding the day of the sacrifice of the Passover lambs that would be consumed the following evening.

John notes elsewhere that the day Jesus was crucified was the “day of preparation”<sup>7</sup> for the Sabbath. Saturdays were not the only days that were called Sabbath. There were other Sabbaths, and the Passover was one of them—a high Sabbath. The High Sabbath, Passover, can fall on any day of the week. However, if Friday evening was Passover, the day of preparation would have begun Thursday evening, and the preparations would have included readying the home for the Sabbath by clearing out all leaven. The preparations would have continued on until sunset Friday evening and included the slaying of the Passover lambs for the evening’s celebration feast beginning the Sabbath.

John also notes elsewhere that when Jesus was arrested and taken to Pontius Pilate—in the wee hours of the morning, long after supper the previous evening—the Jewish leaders did not want to defile themselves by entering Pilate’s Praetorium because they wanted to be ritually clean so that they “might eat the Passover.”<sup>8</sup> The Roman governor was thus obliged to come down to them.

As mentioned above in the Introduction, we know from the Gospels of Matthew and Mark that Judas had already decided in Bethany to betray Jesus. The decision had been made after Mary had anointed Jesus’ feet with the costly perfume. From the other Gospels, we know that at the time of our reading in John, Judas had sometime before hatched a plot with the Jewish religious leaders to carry out his plan. But this is the first mention John makes of the treachery.

## Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God, and was going back to God,

Jesus not only knew that the time had come to give His life for His beloved mankind, He was fully aware of His own exalted identity. He is the absolute Ruler of the Universe.

Having left His glorious position in the form of God, to take the form of a man to accomplish the work of salvation, He was about to return from whence He had come—to God.

## rose from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself about.

In his Gospel, John does not record the establishment of the Eucharist—the other Gospel writers do. However, there is much that John includes in this and the following chapters that the other three Gospels have left out. The episode of the foot washing is recorded only in John.

It was the custom to bathe before going to dinner, but the walk barefoot or in sandals through the filthy streets necessitated that the feet be washed upon entering a house. Part of the furnishings for the upper room would have been a basin and a pitcher of water for the purpose of foot washing. The custom of reclining, supported by one elbow, to dine would place one’s head near the chest of a neighbor, but one’s feet near the head of another, further down the table. Thus, unwashed feet would be unpleasant for the diners.

The job of washing feet fell to a slave or to the person of lowest rank in the host’s household. It was a humble and servile job.

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<sup>7</sup> John 19:31, 42

<sup>8</sup> John 18:28

Jesus had no slaves, and evidently none of His disciples had considered performing the service. And so, they had begun to eat with unwashed feet. Luke tells us that there was an argument that evening about who was the greatest of the disciples. Possibly the argument was triggered by the dirty feet situation, or perhaps, by the placement at the table—normally according to rank or honor.

That Jesus rose and laid aside His garments of dignity—His flowing outer robe and the seamless tunic that the soldiers who later crucified Him considered so unique<sup>9</sup>—and took upon Himself the attire of a slave—girded with the towel of foot-washers—calls to mind the teaching of St. Paul about the Incarnation:

“Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bondservant, and being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”<sup>10</sup>

Just as He laid aside the dignity and honor that belonged to Him as God to become a man at His Incarnation, so here again, He laid aside the dignity and honor that belonged to Him as the disciples’ Teacher and Lord to take the position of a slave; He did this fully cognizant of His position as the Ruler of the Universe, Who was soon to resume His glorious throne in heaven,

Then He poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples’ feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded.

Having girded Himself as a servant, He humbled Himself to perform the service.

And so He came to Simon Peter. He said to Him, “Lord, do **You** wash **my** feet?”

Peter was apparently not the first disciple Jesus approached. The pronouns, **You** and **my**, are placed for emphasis. Peter is appalled that **Jesus** would stoop to wash **his** feet.

Jesus answered and said to him, “What I do you do not realize now, but you shall understand hereafter.”

Jesus recognized the feeling of Peter, but promised to explain later.

Peter said to Him, “Never shall You wash my feet!” Jesus answered him, “If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me.”

Not content with the reply of Jesus, the impetuous Peter rebelled totally against the prospect of Jesus performing this service for him.

The response of Jesus is the most difficult statement to understand in this account. What does it mean, “*You have no part with me*”? The answer depends on the symbolism one attaches to the act of foot washing.

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<sup>9</sup> John 19:23-24

<sup>10</sup> Philippians 2:5-8

Those who see it as symbolic of forgiveness— because of Jesus’ explanation below about the disciples being clean—consider *having part with Jesus* as a circumlocution for salvation. We need cleansing forgiveness of our daily sins in addition to our general cleansing salvation.<sup>11</sup>

Those who understand it as symbolic of service— because of Jesus’ further explanation after He resumed His place at the table—see *having part with Jesus* as a circumlocution for participating with Him in His salvation program for mankind, that is, in the work of bringing the lost into the kingdom of God. Christ’s service to us is an example for us to follow in serving others.

A combination of the first two explanations may be what Jesus had in mind. That is, Peter needed to accept the service that Jesus was performing—an illustration of that greatest of services Our Lord would perform on the Cross: give His life for our salvation. The foot washing was an illustration of Jesus giving His life for us,<sup>12</sup> and later, we should do the same by giving our lives for others. As John would later write, “We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.”<sup>13</sup> Our attitude should be the same as our Savior’s; we should love to the ultimate, and be willing to give even our lives for the good of others.

Others see the foot washing as cleansing from daily sins, not for salvation, but for fellowship with Christ.

Peter may have understood it to mean that if he did not submit to the foot washing, he would be, no longer, one of the disciples, and thus, no longer have a position among the King’s lieutenants in the coming Kingdom.

**Simon Peter said to Him, “Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head,”**

Peter then swung to the opposite extreme and wanted a complete washing. He wanted total participation with Jesus, his King.

**Jesus said to him, “He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you.”**

Jesus gave Peter an example of why only his feet needed to be washed. They were the only part of him that was dirty. They had all bathed, but they had walked through the streets with the result that all the disciples had dirty feet.

This explanation would have left us with a simple example of service. But when Jesus used the bath symbolically with reference to Judas, we are left with the question, “If the bath represents true faith in Christ and submission to His Lordship, what does the foot washing by Christ represent?”

**For He knew the one who was betraying Him; for this reason He said, “Not all of you are clean.”**

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<sup>11</sup> John Stott, the highly respected British theologian, minister, and teacher, holds the opinion that salvation has two parts, the general cleansing of justification when one puts his faith in Christ as Savior, and the ongoing cleansing as one asks for forgiveness for daily sins. John Stott *Through the Bible Through the Year* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006) p. 232.

<sup>12</sup> Until after the Crucifixion and Resurrection, Peter and the other disciples had not accepted Jesus’ teaching that He must die; they simply could not accept the idea that their King must die.

<sup>13</sup> 1 John 3:16

Judas was present, and Jesus also washed his feet. The clean and the unclean had their feet washed. Jesus served them all, without exception.

But Judas, even though he may have received water baptism, was not clean spiritually as the others were, even as the rebellious Peter was spiritually clean. Judas had sided actively with the enemies of Jesus. Judas was a traitor to Jesus and the Kingdom. Jesus knew this, even as He washed the traitor's feet.

Put another way: Judas was the only disciple of the twelve who did not have a true relationship with Christ. For Judas, Jesus was not his Lord. Therefore, Judas, though he might have bathed his body with water, was not spiritually clean. Moreover, though Jesus had graciously washed the dirty feet of Judas—symbolizing that our Lord would die for Judas and all unbelievers, as well as for those who would receive this act of mercy—neither the death of Jesus nor the symbolic act of foot-washing would mean anything for the unbeliever who refused to place his faith in Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior.

**And so when He had washed their feet, and taken His garments, and reclined at the table again,**

Having performed the necessary service, the reason for laying aside the garments of dignity, which would have interfered with the performance of this service, no longer applied. He, therefore, took again His garments of dignity, and took again His rightful place at the head of the table.

St. Paul continued the above quoted passage about the Incarnation by adding that after Christ submitted to death on a cross:

“Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE SHOULD BOW, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”<sup>14</sup>

This One had assumed the role of the lowliest servant, had washed their feet, and had resumed His former place. By doing so, he had illustrated His incarnation, sacrifice, and restoration to His former position of honor.

**He said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you?”**

The question He asked the disciples was rhetorical; they did not understand. And so, true to His promise to Peter, Jesus explained.

**You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am.**

The disciples gave Jesus titles that reflected the honor of His position among them. Jesus accepted these titles because they reflected the truth about His identity.

**If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For, I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you.**

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<sup>14</sup> Philippians 2:9-10. The Name that is above every name: St. Paul's readers would have instantly understood it to be the unpronounced and Holy Name of LORD, written in the Hebrew Scriptures only with the four Hebrew consonants of the Tetragrammaton: YHWH. This is the NAME of Almighty God that is now recognized in heaven—and later will be recognized in the entire universe—as belonging to Jesus. His name is YHWH.

If Jesus, recognized by the disciples as the greatest one in their midst and as the Teacher they should learn from and copy, stooped to perform the lowliest service for them, they ought to do the same for each other. No service for others should be beneath them.

**Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master; neither is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him.**

The disciples had a pride problem. Each wanted to be the greatest, the one closest to Jesus. Jesus turned their pride upside down. Without losing the proper realization of Who He is, He deliberately became a servant among them. Since this is the way their master has chosen to act, the servants should not think they are too superior to do the same.

In one sense, Jesus is the disciples' sender. They must copy Him. But in another sense, Jesus has been sent by God. Jesus' actions reflect God's. Jesus is here teaching the great servant heart of God for His beloved mankind. He has stooped even to the cross.

**If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.”**

It is one thing to know, to understand; it is quite another to act on that understanding. But if they do, they will be blessed.

## APPLICATION

On Great Thursday evening, our Armenian Church is one of the Christian churches that re-enacts the washing of His disciples' feet by our Lord. “According to ancient rites, not only a given number of feet were to be washed, but, after the high-ranking clergy washed the feet of the priests, the latter in turn were to wash the feet of the entire congregation.”<sup>15</sup> This can be a very meaningful service if we understand it not simply as a beautiful tradition, but as the vivid illustration our Lord meant it to be.

In our world, as in the Apostles' day, pride seems to be ingrained in our nature. We want to be superior to the next person. We want our country to be superior; we want our ancestors to be superior. We want to be first. We like to see our pictures and our names honored in some way, even in the Church. But our Lord gives us the foot washing ceremony to show us that the way of pride is not His way, and must not be our way.

We were all created in the image of God and that is indeed a very high honor. Pride has marred that beautiful image, but God has shown us what it should be. Our God stripped Himself and stooped to take on the form of a servant, our form, a human being. He did this not only in order to save us from our sins, but to restore His image in us and to show us His great heart. The most glorious and exalted Person in and above the Universe, the only One Who has any right to be prideful, is not proud; our great and mighty God has a servant's heart.

In the Jewish culture of the first century of our era, a slave was stationed to wash the feet of those entering the home for dinner. It was a menial job, and only the lowest in the

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<sup>15</sup> Malachia Ormanian *A Dictionary of the Armenian Church* translated by Bedros Norehad (New York: St. Vartan Press, 1984) p.34.



household performed it. Since our Lord had no slaves, if the job were to be done on that last evening, when Jesus and the disciples met in the upper room for supper, who would volunteer? No one considered himself the lowest, and so the feet went unwashed and the supper began.

Then to the astonishment of the disciples, the greatest in their midst, removed his garments, girded himself with the towel of the servant, poured the water in the basin, and one by one stooped down to wash the disciples' feet. Only Peter recovered enough to vehemently protest that His beloved Lord and Master should not take that humiliating position for his sake. He only acquiesced when Jesus explained that Peter had to accept His service or have no part with Him.

Only when all the disciples' feet had been washed, including those of Judas, whom Jesus knew to be a traitor, did our Lord take again His garments and resume His place at the head of the table. The act vividly pictures what St. Paul has taught us about the Incarnation. Our Lord, although He

“was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE SHOULD BOW, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”<sup>16</sup>

The next day, Our Lord was *obedient to death* for our sakes, and died for the sins of the entire world, believers and unbelievers alike. Our Lord loved us to the uttermost and as He explained at the Supper that Holy evening, He has set us an example. No service was too lowly for the Incarnate God, the greatest of which was His death for us on the Cross to restore those who would accept it to Himself. He calls us to a life of service as well. Although we have the exalted position of children of God, we must never think any service is too lowly for us. He calls us to love mankind even to the laying down of our lives in the greatest service we can do for them—bring them the good news of Jesus Christ and the salvation He offers. That is our part with Him, our part with the Lord.

May this Holy evening find us truly committed to Him and His sacred service, that His beloved mankind might be restored to God.

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<sup>16</sup> See footnotes 8 and 13.