

## In the heat of the night

Ex 12.1-4, 11-14; Ps 116.1-2, 12-19; 1 Cor 11.23-26; John 13.1-17, 31b-35

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*Holy Thursday (Year A) (March 28, 2002)*

In the Heat of the Night. It's a classic film with some classic scenes. One which stands out concerns the black Detective Tibbs and the white Sheriff, who have gone to pay a visit to the wealthiest man in the town, who is also of course white. This wealthy man is clearly shown to be cut from the same cloth as any slave owner of hundred years earlier. He is also a suspect, in Tibbs' mind, in the murder. When the white landowner realizes that Tibbs suspects him of murder, he slaps him. Without blinking Tibbs slaps him right back.

When I saw this film in the 1960's the civil rights movement was winding down, but the memories were very fresh. That scene caused audible gasps. But, it was not the slapping of Tibbs that caused the gasp; it was Tibbs reaction and slap that caused the gasps. You just don't do that! That is doing the unthinkable. It is scandalous to see a slave take the position of a master, which that slap implied. In fact, the landowner says to Tibbs: "I could have had you shot for that". But, since it is some years later, the landowner turns to the the sheriff and says to him: "Well, Sheriff what are you going to do about it?" thinking that the Sheriff will take Tibbs and see that he is put away for good. The Sheriff, however, played with remarkable skill by Rod Steiger, looks for words and says: "Well, well, I don't know what I'm going to do."

It's hard for us today to see the impact that that scene had on the minds of a whole generation of Americans growing up knowing that slavery was wrong but that it still existed in a de facto way in the South. It's hard to see why people gasped.

### FOOTWASHING AS SLAVE SERVICE

It's just as hard for us to understand the impact of Jesus' action during that final supper with his followers. What he does you know well: he gets up from the supper, gets a towel, binds it around his waste, and begins to wash the feet of his students. It was what was expected a slave would do before supper in preparation for the supper. And here is Jesus acting like a slave. It's ludicrous, and it's scandalous. No wonder Peter protests. It's scandalous to see one who should be in the position of a slave owner lowering himself to acting like a slave. It would not have happened in the US South under slavery. Yes, it is scandalous to see a former slave like Det. Tibbs usurp the rightful place of the white man, and it is scandalous to see the rightful master and lord lower himself to fulfilling the task of a slave. But that's what Jesus does. Do you see how scandalous it is?

But why? What's his intent? Does he want to show his followers that slavery is somehow good? No one who knew slavery could ever say that THAT was Jesus' point! Or, does he want to level the social playing field, to say that there is neither master nor slave? Well, that's not entirely unrealistic, but we know from the rest of John's Gospel that Jesus is not a social reformer.

No, the footwashing is a symbol. It has nothing to do with washing anyone's feet as some sort of final good or social goal, anymore than baptism has to do with cleansing a person's body. Just as baptism was a symbol of the Jewish people's preparation to welcome their Messiah, footwashing was Jesus' chosen symbol to show his students that God was willing to do slave service for them, and in fact for the world.

What? Now, if I were speaking to people who knew slavery first hand, you would stop me and say: no person is ever willingly going to become a slave, much less God! And you would be absolutely right. But, that's exactly what happens.

From near the beginning of John's Gospel, Jesus has told those willing to listen that God loves the world. Now, the word "love" in Jesus' day does not mean what you and I think it means today: romance, hugs and kisses, and lots of affection. In Jesus' day, "love" meant "service": wives loved their husbands, children loved their parents, and slaves loved their masters. Not vice versa. At least not vice versa until Jesus. If you were to ask one of Jesus' students what Jesus was doing, kneeling before them, washing their feet like a common, domestic slave, that student would have told you: well, he's loving us, but I can't figure out why? And if that student would have heard what Jesus had been saying for 3 years, he would have added: "and the strangest part is that if Jesus is doing only what the Father says and does, as he has always told us, that that means that God is loving us,

too!" And that, my friends, to use an old expression, would have "blown" that student's mind. God, a slave? This is crazy! No master will become a slave, much less the master of the universe!

#### WHY DOES GOD IN JESUS BECOME A SLAVE TO SLAVES and WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS?

So, let's ask the question: why? Why does Jesus show God like a slave to his students? What does he hope to achieve? Well, it doesn't mean that God becomes a personal servant, going around doing menial tasks when you don't like what you have to do. Jesus' mother says to him: they have no wine, implying that he should do something about it. He responds: so? No slave there. It also doesn't mean that God will go around healing all the little hurts and mending the sores, or even the big ones. A ruler comes to Jesus to plead for his son who is at the point of death, and Jesus says: so? Still no slave there.

No, but Jesus does show what service means. Throughout the Gospel he shows those who are willing to see that God's service consists in showing people the truth, and in speaking the truth. In fact, he shows those who are willing to see it that in Jesus, God will do everything possible, including dying, to enable people to see the truth, a truth that is masked by lies and falsehoods that people in power erect ... especially religious people in religious institutions of power. It will be this service, not any good deeds, that gets Jesus killed the next day because people in power do not take well to having their lies and their abuses unmasked and their phony power mocked for being phony. And this is most especially true of religious people, who seem to take it worst of all. Just as God will go to any length, including death, to ensure that the truth is told, they will go to any lengths, including murder, to stop the truth from being told. And they will use any means, including treason and betrayal to arrest those who do.

This is why there is such a heavy atmosphere that hangs over this scene and this incredibly scandalous act of Jesus. God in Jesus is pictured as holding out for all those who are chained through any kind of slavery (be it economic, or psychological, or domestic, or whatever) a hope for freedom by unmasking the lies that serve as a chain and the power that serves as a lock. It is the moment of their exodus and this is their passover. But, this freedom will come at a price, the price of displacing those lies and liars. And those threatened will and do fight back.

And the means chosen here is betrayal. Remember: Jesus was not executed by accident: oops, wrong man! Nor was Jesus even executed by those whom you might expect, the Romans. Yes, I know: the Romans actually did the job, but Pilate only did so after finding Jesus innocent and fearing the High Priests' threat of open revolt. No, Jesus is handed over to be executed by Judas and by the Jewish High Priests, "his own", those who probably had the best chance to see who he was and what he was about. The High Priests had followed Jesus from the beginning; Judas had been one of Jesus' students for some time, even having his feet washed by Jesus that very night. Unlike the Romans, for whom Jesus was a weird little man with some enigmatic statements, Judas and the High Priests knew very well what Jesus was about and they didn't like it one, little bit. So, they betrayed him and forced the Romans to execute him. The good shepherd was not killed by the wolves that might normally be expected to attack the flock, but by the hired hands, with whom he had eaten and drank.

If we were a slave culture like that of Jesus' day or like the one that exists In the Heat of the Night, we would understand immediately how scandalous Jesus' "love" is and how dangerous it is.

#### THE IMPLICATIONS FOR JESUS' FOLLOWERS

And it still is. We would also realize that when he says to his followers that he was going to give them just one commandment, namely, "that you love one another as I have loved you", that is, " that you serve each other just as I have served you", that he was entrusting to them a great task of liberation -- namely, to set the captives free by speaking the truth as you have heard it from the Father -- but that he was also condemning them to a fate that was pictured for them (as the footwashing had been here) less than 24 hours later from the cross. He was telling them: be known as those who, like the God that I make known to you, serve each other by telling the truth to each other. That will be such an astounding thing in a world that lives on the basis of lies that people will say: wait, aren't you followers of Jesus? And, unless you are willing to lie (like Peter) you will find both death at the end of that same road, but also a life that neither you nor those whom you serve could even ask or imagine. For those who hold power through lies and deceit, especially those who hold religious power and cover abuse, will never let their lies and abuses be uncovered without a fight, even though the only way to truth and true life will come once those lies and abuses are uncovered by the light.

But, then, shouldn't we expect that our fate, as we tell the truth, will be his? After all, no servant is greater than his master, in this heat of the night or any other. If we have died with him, we shall live with him.