Stripped for Service
Sermon preached at Duke Chapel on Maundy Thursday, April 5, 2012 by Rev Dr Jo Bailey Wells

Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14
1 Corinthians 11:23-26
John 13:1-17, 31b-35

‘This is how you should eat the Passover’, instructs the book of Exodus, ‘your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly…’

Tonight begins Passover: Jews all over the world are tying their sandals, girding their loins and chomping their lamb hurriedly —in readiness for the hour to come when they would depart from the world of Egypt. In remembrance and celebration of the night when God passed over.

So with Jesus and his disciples, this night, sequestered together in an upper room, even as the rest of Jerusalem teemed with Passover pilgrims in festive spirit outside. But Jesus is far from festive. He is not in a hurry. His loins are not, apparently, girded for a quick escape. His staff is not in his hand.

If Jesus had a staff, then he has laid down that symbol of authority: instead he uses his hands to take a pitcher of water and fill a basin. Jesus takes off his outer garments - he’s not going out just yet. As to girding his loins, Jesus takes a towel and wraps it around his waist. If the disciples were wearing their sandals, as per the Exodus instructions, then Jesus has unnervingly untied them: to kneel before each of them, in turn, and wash their dirty naked calloused feet. (Let’s face it – I don’t suppose feet in those days were any more beautiful than yours or mine; indeed probably a whole lot worse)

Instead of togging up for a journey, Jesus strips down, for service. Instead of hurrying on his way Jesus, slows down – even though, John makes clear, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world. Instead of grasping his ‘staff’ – asserting his authority in more conventional ways – he wraps a towel around himself, and kneels down to do the servant’s work.

Now, what would you choose to do during your final evening with close friends? (This is a question on the forefront of my mind just now you understand!). Jesus kneels before his friends to wash their feet, and then shares a meal – not just any meal but likely the one that recalls God’s defining faithfulness in the past in order to better trust God’s faithfulness in the present. This is the intimate business to which he chooses to attend: John calls it ‘loving them to the end’.

Jesus is preparing to suffer. Jesus is preparing to die. Jesus is preparing to say goodbye. He is very intentionally and symbolically preparing for the end. And what does he do? He pre-enacts the way in which he will lay down his life for the world. He removes his garments – the same word, probably the very same garments, that (tomorrow) the guards will take from him at the cross. His laying down of those garments is the very same expression that Jesus used previously to describe the good shepherd laying down his life for his sheep. The laying down of the outer garments is clearly an allusion to the crucifixion.

Jesus is preparing for the crucifixion: with a stripping down, for service.

Think more with me about this stripping – a stripping that will be reflected at the end of this eucharist as we watch the chapel being de-nuded of its adornments and finery: in particular the altar stripped to its bare wood
so that we find it naked and vulnerable. Like the Lord of the universe, perhaps no longer as imposing as you might have expected.

That is what Jesus is doing with his disciples, that first Maundy Thursday, that last supper. First, he lays himself bare and shares his vulnerability. Note how this is a very intentional, chosen stripping – a far cry from the obligatory strip-searching of every new arrival in our federal prisons. Or the non-consensual kind of stripping that happens with an abusive physical or sexual encounter. Or the stripping of other freedoms – like those who are set to lose home and citizenship in Sudan this weekend. What will happen tomorrow is no accident of history, there is no unwitting or unwilling detail for which Jesus did not come, and did not prepare. When others strip him tomorrow it may seem like a violation, but tonight Jesus is demonstrating his willingness, his preparedness, his utter commitment to the purpose for which he came. To love them to the end.

That he lays down his outer garment, that which covers his body is often taken to represent Jesus laying aside his divinity, and revealing his full humanity. At the least, he takes off some of the layers which we use to hide from one another, that which could be taken to say ‘I’m not staying; really, I can’t stay for that drink you kindly offered’. [You know, the wearing of the coat is something that takes on major cultural significance for me in comparing church life between the UK and the US. Churches in the UK are often chilly damp places – at least, that’s the excuse for keeping the coat on; whereas from North Carolina to Minnesota I’d say your first instinct on arriving in church is to take off the outer layer, even if you have to bundle it under your seat]. This kind of stripping makes us ready for an encounter that is less protected, unguarded, unhurried... the real me ready for some open-heart time with the real you. And at this point Jesus kneels to wash feet – to handle, to touch, skin-to-skin, flesh to flesh. We may see here the fullness of the incarnation, of God becoming human, of Jesus teaching us how to be human, how to invest, how to love and be loved.

And the context for this foot-washing is conventionally understood to be a Passover seder. Yet Jesus strips the event of its routine expectations (and a Passover seder is nothing if not a routine, as per Exodus 12). He follows the tradition but he develops it, he innovates. He strips away any temptation to view God’s work of redemption as something completed at the exodus. Jesus strips the evening of its past tense – of the safety that comes from remembering something that happened way back and, rather shockingly, brings it into the present, here and now. As 1 Cor 11 tells us –he lifts the glass of wine – a practice of lifting the cup which routinely happens several times at a Seder. But what he says when he does so makes us sit up in horror: it is as if he jumps in it. He takes bread and describes it as his body; he takes the cup and tells them here is my blood. Jesus is no longer just the leader of the gathering – the one we might expect to be bearing the staff, as father, elder, shepherd. He is not just the one presiding at the table over the commemoration; but declaring himself as the one who from now on they are to commemorate. He is the shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. Indeed, he is the sacrificial lamb who brings about God’s passing-over; it is his body and blood, Jesus stripped not just of his outer garments but of his very skin, that the disciples are now daring to see, touch and look in the face. Huh..... Can you dare to take off your coat and stick around? Can you eat the hunk of bread he passes to you calling it his body, and drink not just from the same cup but from the cup he calls his own blood? Are you ready for this level of open-heart time with the one who has shed his divinity to engage our humanity? Do you dare now to feed on this human lamb, to take inside your body, this naked servant-shepherd-lamb? Jesus is about to be turned inside out: and he’s inviting us to share his humanity, and be turned inside out too.

Notice how with the feet and with the food Jesus also strips away any temptation to favoritism. He shares the bread and the cup with all of the disciples; he washes all of their feet. Some of them make a fuss, some of them are unworthy – no matter. Jesus is inclusive and non-preferential. He strips away personal choice in his commitment to serve, and to love.
We’re all unworthy. Jesus’ stripping and self-giving strips us even as it includes us. It strips us of our own self-protections; it enjoins us to be present even when we don’t understand or can’t handle the pressure (you can’t have your feet washed in absentia). To be present to Jesus, to his grief, to his giving, to his love. To let him touch your feet, even if they’re ticklish, even if they’re revolting. Not to run away; to eat with him, to eat from him even when it’s shocking; to stay with him, even if you can’t stay awake. And to do anything but declare it an evening of ‘business as usual’.

Actually, not to do anything. Jesus very specifically gives us two things to do. And please, relax, nowhere does Jesus ask you literally to strip down or strip off! Quite... But Jesus does ask us to keep on doing the two activities he inaugurates at this last supper. With the washing of feet he says ‘you also should do, as I have done to you’. And holding up the elements of bread and wine he says, ‘Do this in remembrance of me’.

Jesus is so considerate to my humanity. I find it so much easier to have a ‘to do’ list than a ‘to be’ list. What should I do again? Wash the feet of others, because servants are not greater than their masters, and receive the bread and wine, the body and blood, in remembrance of Jesus.

Do we do these things to remember another defining moment of God’s faithfulness, of God’s redemption, two thousand years ago? Is it for the sake of keeping alive a memory of Jesus for future generations? Do we gather tonight, to begin the annual observance of the Triduum, the most holy three days simply to prove we don’t suffer from amnesia? (Can you hear Peter say, ‘But Lord, I would NEVER forget...’)

No, we do these things in remembrance of Jesus – because Jesus did them and told us to do them – not just to help us remember Jesus. (1Cor 11:26) We eat the bread and drink the cup to proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. (Jn 13:35) We love one another – as Jesus has loved us – so that everyone will know who are his disciples. Jesus gives us a ‘to do’ list as a means to live into his life and death; to re-enact them, to participate and to proclaim his suffering and his glory.

Stay here awhile... Some tonight have already done as Jesus did, in washing one another’s feet. Next on the ‘to do’ list is to eat and drink, sitting with Jesus at the table while simultaneously receiving his sacrifice. Stick around to learn how best to be human: not, as with the Passover, with loins girded, sandal s on the feet, staff in hand and eating hurriedly. Oh no. Rather, in coat-releasing, feet-offering, self-giving, no-limit-loving, anyone-serving, fully-present-right-now: staying through the suffering, and somehow embodying God’s glory.