

## MAUNDY THURSDAY



John 13:12 "After (Jesus) had washed (the disciples') feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord -- and you are right, for that is what I am. So, if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. 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.'"

"Times they are a changing," sang Bob Dylan in 1964, and it is still true today, especially for the Christian Church. As we have noted before, Christianity is in the midst of a major transformation in our day. For the 'old' model, the old way of doing things, is clearly not working, as the churches have seen drastic declining attendance for forty years now, all across the

spectrum of denominations, and especially among the young. We need only to observe the declining presence at this service in Holy Week to confirm the need for change.

The traditional image of the beautiful church situated on top of the hill, with its doors wide open on Sunday mornings, and good people inside to warmly welcome others in, is just not reaching the people down in the streets anymore. The former corporate model of a priest as the chief executive, with a staff and offices offering a variety of interesting programs and liturgy is not bringing people into the life of our congregations either, and is becoming cost-prohibitive. Those represent old-fashioned twentieth century practices that may be inappropriate in the new twenty-first century. A new age requires the churches to think differently, to respond differently, to change, as the Church have changed so many times in the past, over the centuries, indeed over the millennia.

And there are some wonderfully exciting new patterns of ministry emerging. For instance, it has become almost standard in my day for many congregations to offer a public blessing of the Animals on St. Francis' feast for the benefit of the wider community, usually on their front lawn, visible from the street. Likewise, it has now become common practice for churches in urban centers to come together to offer a weekly public

celebration of the Eucharist on the town green or the public square or the commons, especially for the poor and homeless, as a witness to our values as Christians for the meek and lowly. The Episcopal Diocese in Massachusetts has been organizing such a service on the Boston Commons for over half a century now. Our Cathedral in Hartford does the same with its so-called the Church on the Pond, as does Trinity on the Green in New Haven. This is one of those wonderful examples of the Christian churches often working together, often across denominations, outside their walls, to meet the people of God where they are -- - to set an example of attending to the real needs of one another, following the servant model of Jesus in the washing of his disciples' feet on this night.

Ashes to Go is another example of this kind of new ministry, which has become extremely popular in the last ten years or so, where church members offer ashes on Ash Wednesday to passersby at Railroad stations, bus terminals, and even shopping malls. I did this almost every year when I was in Bridgeport, accompanied by the downtown Methodist pastor and the Congregational minister, and we were delighted by how well it was received by the commuters as they rushed off to work, a simple moment of grace on an important day in the church's

calendar. It is another example of the church becoming visible and engaged in new ways.

The Trumbull Episcopal clergy tried it at the Mall a few years ago, working together, and it was so successful that they quickly organized a Palms to Go, for Palm Sunday, offering palms to walkers on the trail at the Old Mine Park, but passersby didn't seem as interested in receiving Palms on Palm Sunday afternoon as they did receiving Ashes on Ash Wednesday at the train station or shopping mall. So, we 'try things on' and see what resonates with the people. We must be willing to be imaginative, and to experiment, and to fail. St. Mary the Virgin in New York City a few years ago paraded their Palm Sunday Procession down the street right through Times Square, and people along the way were eager to receive palms from the parishioners as they marched in procession, guided of course by a crucifer, two torches and two thurifers!

Public walking of the Stations of the Cross through the streets and alleyways of our cities has also become more popular than simply walking the Stations inside our churches, unseen by outsiders. The clergy of this Diocese have done so in Hartford during Holy Week twice now, once marking the spots along the way where young people had been killed by rampant gun violence in the Hartford community, and the Council of Churches of Greater

Bridgeport canceled their very traditional, very well attended 3-hour, long-standing, Ecumenical Service on Good Friday in order to offer instead a public walking of the Stations of the Cross in downtown, sharing our faith openly before others. It may have attracted fewer people at first, but did it have a greater impact on the wider community?

Likewise, some congregations for Maundy Thursday, are now washing, not the feet of each other, but the feet of poor, at homeless shelters and soup kitchens and food banks. We tried that my last year in Bridgeport at the Thursday Night Community Supper at the Congregational Church across the street. The downtown clergy on their knees washing the feet of homeless guests of that dinner. It was a marvelous image and a magical evening. We also organized new socks for everyone, and offered foot massages, pedicures, and even medical care by visiting nurses and a podiatrist. Oh, it took a whole lot of preparation and a whole lot of volunteers, and a great deal of courage to do things so differently. But it captured, I believe, the intent of Jesus' new commandment that we follow his example this night. Still, it is so much easier to just keep doing what we've always done, and just hoping for a different result.

So, this new day challenges us as Christians to discover new ways to express and relate our Christian message and

practices to the unchurched world around us, to let them know who we are and what we care about. We have got to get out of our churches and into the community, if we are to survive, if we are to be the church. The Church in the end is a service organization, not a private club. And we need to work together with each other, across parish and even denominational lines. We have got to get down and dirty in the streets where the beloved people of God are. The congregations that are doing that today, are the ones that are growing.

These new practices move our encounter with God and that invitation to new life out of our church buildings into the streets of our everyday lives, where we really live out our faith to God. So how can we at St. John's do more of that? What can we imagine doing differently to serve the people in our community, to bear witness to our faith, and to our values? How can we get down on our knees as Jesus did this night and serve one another? The grace we offer in the end comes from God, not us, and it is the same free gift out on the streets, at the same cost as God's grace made known inside our pretty little churches. So I invite us this Triduum, those three holiest days of Holy Week, which start tonight, to begin to think of new ways that we can go out in the streets where we live and work and play, to follow the example of Jesus in washing the disciples'

feet, and to witness in small ways to the grace of God that we have found in our own lives and in the life of this congregation, and then invite others to join us in our common mission and ministry. AMEN.