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Scripture: The Gift – Jesus as High Priest

If you were with us last week, you will know that we started a message series as we head for Easter, that we have entitled, *The Gift 2.0*. Why 2.0? Well, because it is meant to be a continuation of our Christmas series from 2018. You may remember it was entitled, *The Gift*. This is the second part of that series.

At Christmas, our focus was on the three gifts that the Wise Men brought to the infant Jesus shortly after he had been born. These gifts, Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh all had a practical purpose at the time but were also deeply symbolic. The Gold represented the Kingship of Jesus. That Jesus was the promised Messiah who was sent by God to save his people. Frankincense, a resin was used in the temple at this time as part of the offerings. It represented Jesus as the great High Priest, the mediator between God and his people. Myrrh was a spice used to embalm dead bodies in Jesus' day. This gift represented the sacrifice that Jesus would make by giving his life on the cross.

At the time these Wise Men gave these gifts to an infant Jesus, the symbolism wasn't entirely clear but years later as we now move to Easter, things are beginning to come into focus. Jesus as King, Priest and Sacrifice.

Last week as we launched this series, we looked at Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem on the last week of his earthly life. He led a parade. He doesn't walk into the city. He rides like a King. His mount however is not the white stallion of a commander in chief but a steed of a poor man. Jesus rides in on a lowly donkey, with crowds gathered around him. The people lay their coats and palm branches in his path, representing their submission to him as their King and their belief that as God's promised Messiah, he would lead them to victory over their enemies. The crowd was yelling, *Hosanna* which means *God saves, praise be to God*.

But the people shouting, *Hosanna*, to him along the parade route at the beginning of the week, those same people spit on him, beat him and jeered him with shouts of *Crucify him* as Jesus walked another parade route just five days later. It was a road that led him to Golgotha which ultimately took him to his destiny, the cross. Why their sudden change of heart? Oh, the people wanted a Messiah, a King sent by God but he had to be a warrior. He had to conquered the Romans not kneel to them but that is not the sort of Messiah God sent Jesus to be. He came in humility. The donkey should have been a clue. God came into this fallen world through the person of Jesus. He was God in the flesh. His Kingdom goes beyond the boundaries of politics and nationalism. It is a Spiritual Kingdom that does not gain strength by violence and force but grows in the hearts of people who put their faith and trust in him.

Jesus, the gift from God did come to save humanity, but not from the Romans. He came to save us from ourselves. From our sin and apathy. He came to save us from a lost eternity and instead offers us life eternal in Him. He laid down his life for us, so that we could live. So the question we were challenged with last week was, *how do we respond to this kind of King?*

Today, we take a step closer to the cross in the biblical text. If Jesus rode into Jerusalem at the beginning of the week, then we are now following him in the middle of the week. The backdrop for our story today is a meal. Remember, the great festival of Passover is underway in Jerusalem during this time. For the Jewish people, Passover commemorates the night, centuries before the time of Jesus, when the Israelite people were freed from Egypt and Pharaoh's oppressive rule. God passed over their homes marked by the blood of a sacrificed lamb and then brought judgement on

Egypt. The lamb had to be killed in order to get the blood that would save the people. This story is described in the second book of the bible, Exodus.

Each year, the Israelite people would observe this occasion with a festival and a special meal. They paused to remember and give thanks to God for saving them from death by bringing them out of slavery and sin. They would also renew their hope and trust in Him.

Remember and Renew. For many of us, our annual festivals in our culture, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter cause us as Christians, to do the same things. It is a time to pause and remember God's work in our life in the past and renew our commitment to him for the future and we often gather with family and friends around a special meal that may be steeped in rich tradition. If you were to take a seat at the McIlwraith Christmas dinner, you would expect to find it pretty much the same year after year. Why, because it is tradition! You don't mess with the meal. It has meaning for us.

Let me give you a glimpse of what it would be like if you sat at our table for Christmas dinner. Come gather around my table and the McIlwraith Christmas meal. The setting of the table was important. Extra plates and cutlery represent the number of courses to the meal. A plate and fork are reserved only for the salad. There's a larger plate, fork and knife for the main course. There are crystal glasses for those who want wine. The napkins are also in place. Everyone has their assigned seat based on years of tradition. At Christmas, we always have Christmas crackers. We break them open simultaneously before the meal. Everyone has to wear the crown enclosed. Everyone has to show the small gift inside to the mock *oohs* and *aahs* and everyone has to read the sappy joke.

Next comes the prayer of gratitude and praise as we all hold hands around the table. Then, the food. There is salad as a starter but then we traditionally have Turkey. We have tried ham in the past but, ham's out! Goose or duck? Nope. Not in our family. It's turkey with all the trimmings. That includes Carolyn's awesome stuffing, mashed potatoes, corn, squash, beans, carrots, lots of gravy and of course, the cranberry sauce. You cannot have turkey without cranberry sauce, can I hear an amen!?

Lively conversation ensues as we enjoy good food around the table together. Dessert usually includes a selection of pies. Pumpkin with whipped cream is my favourite at this time of year. Then there is coffee and tea. As my family has gotten older, our time around the table lingers long after the meal is finished. The Christmas meal is very significant in our yearly calendar for our faith and family tradition. I am sure you have these types of meals as well.

It helps you get a bit of an idea of just how significant the Passover meal was for the Jewish people in Jesus' day. Although the crucifixion has captured most of our attention over the centuries, the last Passover meal Jesus shared with his closest followers was also a defining moment for him. In this meal on the eve of his death, Jesus enacted the meaning of his life and ministry. Have you ever noticed that?

Let me invite you around this table 2000 years ago in Jerusalem during Jesus' final Passover. I would invite you to put yourself in the place of one of the disciples. You are seated at the table. What must have been going through their minds? What is going through the mind of Jesus? This meal required a lot of preparation in advance that is why it says in the gospel of Luke that Jesus chooses two of his closest friends, those who have proven themselves trustworthy and faithful, Peter and John to prepare this very significant meal.

First, because they were visiting Jerusalem, they needed to find a location. Then they had to buy the one-year-old unblemished lamb that would serve as the main course and then enough food for four courses to feed thirteen people. Then they had to prepare it. But Jesus had gone before them in all the preparations as it says in,

Luke 22:13-14

They went off to the city and found everything just as Jesus had said, and they prepared the Passover meal there. When the time came, Jesus and the apostles sat down together at the table.

It is important to note here that this is probably not the first Passover meal they had shared with one another. They had now done life together for three years. They sat or reclined around the table much like friends would maybe taking the same positions

around the table as they did the last year or the year before that. At the Passover table, seating was usually assigned. The head of the family was seated in a prominent place, usually the head of the table and the others would spread around the table either oldest to youngest or most important to least important. John, James and Peter, maybe sat a little closer to Jesus. The others fanned out a little further away. Before they would have taken their seats however, it was customary that as guests and family members entered the place where the Passover meal was to be hosted, a servant or a slave would be there to wash their feet. This was normally a task that was performed by the lowest class of people in this day.

You can imagine why, can't you? To wash someone's feet during Jesus' day was a disgusting task. It was beneath those of a certain status. Imagine if your mom or dad or husband or wife, came to you just before people started to arrive for Christmas dinner and said that it was your job to wash the feet of everyone before they sat down at the table. It would probably gross you out a bit and we live in a world that has solid shoes, cushioned socks and pedicures.

We usually shower or bath every day and try to keep our extremities somewhat clean but feet can be funny things can't they? With crooked toes, bunions, athletes foot, fallen arches and what is the newest thing on all those TV commercials now? Toe nail fungus. I don't know about you, but I just don't need to see that on the television, when I am eating a snack. I have even touched on foot odor! Now I know these are things that all of us have encountered from time to time, my feet aren't perfect either. Well, they actually aren't bad. But, being a foot washer is not a task I would eagerly sign up for today. Now, let me tell you about feet in Jesus's day. They took a beating. People walked everywhere. There were no cars, Uber or bicycles. The roads weren't paved and they walked on those dusty streets in sandals. Dirt and mud would cake their feet but so would the filth of animal droppings and urine that also littered the streets. Most people's feet would have been deeply calloused, gnarled and blistered from wear and tear. To bend over and take one of those puppies in your hand and dip it in water and begin scrapping it off was not for the faint of heart. This was the dirty work of slaves.

But it was an important task in this day, especially before communal meals because people reclined at a low table and their feet were very much in view.

After the foot washing, the guests of the Passover meal would gather at their assigned seating at the table. Before them would be four glasses for ritual wine, a plate, cutlery and napkin. Several candles would be distributed on the table as well as a sauce like concoction, unleavened bread, vegetables, vinegar and bottles of wine.

Each course of the meal is started with a ritual cup of wine. The main meal was consumed between the second and third cup. It consisted of roasted lamb, vegetables and bread. Obviously, the lamb represented the lamb that was killed to save the people way back in the book of Exodus. The breaking of the bread is a key moment of the meal, as the host breaks the guest of honour's bread and they dip it together in the sauce and bitter herbs. The Guest then turns to the person beside him and breaks their bread. They dip together and so on it goes. It is in the breaking of bread at the table that true companionship is found.

Prayers, scripture readings, hymns are interspersed all throughout the four courses of the Passover meal. They would all be around the theme of remembering the acts of God to save his people in the past and anticipating a time when he will send the Messiah to save them for all time. Can you see how deeply meaningful and symbolic this Passover meal was for the Jewish people of Jesus' day?

But, in this small, nondescript room in Jerusalem over 2000 years ago, Jesus Christ during the week he was to be crucified, surrounded by his closest followers, redefines the significance of Passover. In dramatic fashion, Jesus takes a loaf of bread.

Notice he doesn't take the leg of the roasted lamb like would be the norm. No, he takes the bread and says something rather shocking to his disciples.

Luke 22:19

*"This is my body, which is given for you.
Do this in remembrance of me."*

There is silence around the table. Then he picks up a goblet of wine and says,

This wine is my blood poured out for your sins”.

There is more silence around the table. In these dramatic moments, Jesus overturned the entire sacrificial system of the Old Testament. He offered forgiveness without the lamb and the blood and he did it far away from the temple. If the Jewish leaders weren't already scheming to kill Jesus, this would have given them cause. Blasphemy. With these words, he is announcing that through his impending death, a new covenant would replace the old way of animal sacrifice. Forgiveness now would be offered through him.

Now again, let me just be clear, these words and actions would have shocked his followers in that room with Jesus. Then he does something else that is equally shocking. It is only captured in the gospel of John's account of the Last Supper. Look how the scene is set up in,

John 13:1-3

Before the Passover celebration, Jesus knew that his hour had come to leave this world and return to his Father. He had loved his disciples during his ministry on earth, and now he loved them to the very end. It was time for supper, and the devil had already prompted Judas, son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had given him authority over everything and that he had come from God and would return to God.

Jesus knew this was his time, Judas was already plotting with the authorities to betray him. His death was imminent so as the passage continues it says,

John 13:3-4

Jesus knew that the Father had given him authority over everything and that he had come from God and would return to God. So he got up from the table,

Underline that last sentence. It is important. Why? It signifies Jesus' role as Priest. Our high priest. He is about to lead his people in something. Do you remember when the Wise Men gave the infant Jesus the gift of Frankincense? It was symbolic of Jesus, as the Great High Priest for his people. During this last Passover meal with his closest followers, Jesus

demonstrates his position as High Priest for all of humanity.

In the Old Testament, the High Priest acted as a mediator between God and the people. He stood in the gap. He was responsible for entering the most Holy place of the temple, the Holy of Holies, once a year, on the Day of Atonement or Yom Kippur. He was the only human allowed to go to this sacred place but even he first had to ensure that he was cleansed. He would offer an animal sacrifice for himself but he also had to make sure that his hands and feet were washed. In fact, in Exodus 30:20-21, the Lord gave this command to Moses about High Priests,

Exodus 30:20-21

They must wash with water whenever they go into the Tabernacle to appear before the LORD and when they approach the altar to burn up their special gifts to the LORD—or they will die! ²¹ They must always wash their hands and feet, or they will die.

The High Priest had to be cleansed before he could offer the sacrifices for the people that would cleanse them once again for another year. With the birth of Jesus, the Messiah, he became the final High Priest for the people. In the New Testament book of Hebrews 4:14-16 it says,

Hebrews 4:14-16

So then, since we have a great High Priest who has entered heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to what we believe. ¹⁵ This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin. ¹⁶ So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most.

Just like Jesus is unlike any King the world has ever known, he is also a unique High Priest. What makes him so unique? *he did not sin* Hebrews 4:15. No other High Priest could say that.

So, let's go back to Jesus sitting at the Passover meal with his followers. He has already declared himself to be the final sacrifice, that is shocking enough to those seated around him, but remember

where I left it with, *John 13:4, So he got up from the table,*

What did he get up from the table to do? Look as the passage continues,

John 13:4-5

So he got up from the table, took off his robe, wrapped a towel around his waist, and poured water into a basin. Then he began to wash the disciples' feet, drying them with the towel he had around him.

He got up to wash their feet! As the master of his disciples, Jesus had the customary right to expect that they would wash his feet but he forfeits those privileges. Presumably, there was not a servant present to wash their feet before they sat down, so Jesus literally takes on the role by removing his robe. Try and get in the head space of these followers of Jesus. Dressed now as a servant and with a servant's tools in hand, a basin and a towel, Jesus begins the despicable task of washing his followers' feet. How would you react if Jesus was in this room and approach you with a towel and basin? I am not worthy! If anything, this is something we should do for him! Why does he wash their feet? I would suggest that Jesus washing the feet of the disciples at their last supper together was significant in three ways.

- 1. It was a display of humility and servanthood.**

In this one simple act, Jesus turns the social hierarchies of his day, upside down. To wash someone's feet means that you literally and intentionally place yourself lower than that person. You stoop down to them. It is a position of humility. This was a position Jesus knew well. In fact, for the three years of his ministry on earth, the towel and the basin represented his entire mission. He went often went lower. He forgave, loved and cared. This type of behavior ran completely counter to the society norms of his day. Even amongst his own disciples. In fact, do you know what Jesus' disciples were arguing about just moments before this?

Luke 22:24

Then they began to argue among themselves about who would be the greatest among them.

Since there was no servant present to wash their feet, it would have never occurred to the disciples to wash one another's feet. That task was beneath them. When their Lord stooped over and started to perform this lowly task, they were stunned into silence. Maybe their thought was *oh oh, why didn't we think of that, now Jesus is doing it.* Have you ever been in a situation like that?

When my boys were younger, one of their chores was to take out the garbage the night before pick up. The odd time, they would forget. I would give one reminder, then I would wait and wait, and wait. Until eventually it would be getting late and not wanting to miss the garbage pickup, I would begin to take it out myself. Inevitably, one of them would come running out as I was almost finished, *don't you do it, dad. I will do it!* Maybe that is how the disciples felt. *No, wait Jesus. I'll do it!*

To Peter's credit, he was profoundly uncomfortable with Jesus washing his feet, so never at a loss for words, he protests. Look at their exchange in,

John 13:6-9

When Jesus came to Simon Peter, Peter said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"

Jesus replied, "You don't understand now what I am doing, but someday you will."

"No," Peter protested, "you will never ever wash my feet!"

Jesus replied, "Unless I wash you, you won't belong to me."

Simon Peter exclaimed, "Then wash my hands and head as well, Lord, not just my feet!"

Typical of Peter, he always goes to extremes. When Jesus came to earth, he came not as a conquering King but as a suffering servant. This great High Priest came as a mediator between God and his people and he came, *not to be served but to serve*

others and to give his life as a ransom for many.”
Matthew 20:28.

This humility expressed through his actions with the towel and the basin foreshadowed his ultimate act of humility and love when he gave his life for you and for me on the cross. And make no mistake about it, it is primary because of the towel and basin and all it represents, love, humility and service, that Jesus was eventually killed.

Did you know that there is a basin mentioned one other time leading up to Jesus' death? Anyone know the reference? Matthew 27:24, the crowds were yelling for Pilate to crucify Jesus. It says,

Matthew 27:24

Pilate saw that he wasn't getting anywhere and that a riot was developing. So he sent for a bowl of water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood. The responsibility is yours!"

For Pilate, the basin represented washing his hands of Jesus. It was exclusionary and selfish. For Jesus the basin was inclusive. It was about servanthood and humility. That is one reason Jesus washed his disciples' feet.

The second reason? Let's go back to Peter's reaction.

John 13:8-9

"No," Peter protested, "you will never ever wash my feet!" Jesus replied, "Unless I wash you, you won't belong to me." Simon Peter exclaimed, "Then wash my hands and head as well, Lord, not just my feet!"

Look how Jesus replies to Peter,

John 13:10

Jesus replied, "A person who has bathed all over does not need to wash, except for the feet, to be entirely clean."

Washing the disciple's feet:

2. It was to reveal the true meaning of being washed by Jesus.

Presumably, during the time he spent following Jesus, Peter had experienced the cleansing of

salvation and had already been baptised. He didn't need to be washed again in a spiritual sense.

Let me explain. To be saved by Jesus is a one-time act where we confess our sins, the ways that we have been living apart from him and then we surrender control of our lives to him. Lead me Jesus.

Then it is important that we are baptised. How does that popular song go? *What can wash away our sins? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.* Baptism represents surrendering our lives to Jesus, entering into his death by going down through the waters of baptism and entering into his resurrection and new life. By being brought through the waters, it represents being cleaned and made new by the blood of Jesus. It is so important, and again, I will remind you that we are having a baptism service on Easter weekend.

If you have proclaimed your desire to follow Jesus but have never been baptised, you need to be baptised. But we only have to be baptised once. That act is permanent and complete. Nothing can cleanse us further from our sin.

When I made the decision to be baptised at the age of 12 and went through those waters in that tank. It was deeply meaningful to me but I only have to do that once. I don't have to keep being baptised but we do need continual cleaning from the effects of living in a messy world, don't we?

As we wander through a sin stained world, we can't help but get some of it caked on us, like those disciples had the muck and dust caked on their feet. As they needed their feet washed regularly, so too do we need a continual cleansing from the effects of living in the midst of some pretty dirty things.

This regular washing in our lives is done through the Holy Spirit that lives in us. As we tap into the spirit on a daily basis, we can invite it to purify us and cleanse us. Although, Jesus is not there physically to wash our feet each day, he has given us his spirit to do that work. Do you understand that? It is the second reason Jesus washed his disciples' feet. To demonstrate what it means to be cleansed by Jesus.

The third reason, why Jesus washing the disciple's feet was so significant?

3. **He gave us an example to follow.**

John 13:12-15

After washing their feet, he put on his robe again and sat down and asked, "Do you understand what I was doing? ¹³ You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and you are right, because that's what I am.

And since I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other's feet. I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you.

Jesus is calling us to be people of the towel and basin. As his followers we are to emulate him. To serve one another in humbleness of heart and mind. When you stop and think about it, we have seen evidence of the towel and basin in action all throughout Jesus' ministry. He displayed servanthood, humility and love in all he did. He even stood up against the oppressive regimes of his day.

He chastised the rich who oppressed the poor.

He healed on the Sabbath.

He ate with sinners and socialized with tax collectors.

He welcomed a prostitute's anointing touch.

He travelled with women in public.

His parables stung the religious leaders of his day.

He broke through different ethnic lines and talked freely with Samaritans and Gentiles.

He healed the sick. He fed the hungry.

He blessed the helpless. He touched lepers. He entered pagan homes.

He purged the sacred temple.

He challenged the conventional wisdom and threatened the entrenched powers of His society and his towel and basin behaviour ultimately led to the cross.

The harassment from religious officials and the threat of death did not stifle his crusade of love and service but these actions of our great high

priest were never intended to be a one-person movement. Jesus came to inaugurate a kingdom with many disciples, many citizens. So after washing his disciple's feet on the eve of own death, Jesus invited them to follow his example. He invites them to pick up their towels, pick up their basins and join his movement. And Jesus invites us to do the same. To follow his example, to join the towel and basin brigade.

Let me ask you? Have you ever had someone wash your feet? Have you ever washed someone's feet? At my former church, we used to have a foot washing service on Maundy Thursday, the night before Good Friday, to commemorate this passage in John 13. It was deeply meaningful to me and to our church.

To bend before someone and wash their feet as an act of worship was not disgusting. It was so humbling. To offer your feet to someone to be washed was also very moving. I had a chance to wash my dear mother's feet at one of those services. What a way for me to honour her, as my mom, and the spiritual legacy she has given me.

If you have never washed someone's feet as an act of worship. That may be something that you want to do sometime but get their permission first. Being people of the towel and basin calls us to more than a periodic, ceremonial ritual. Jesus invites us to follow him each day, with lives of service and humility. In fact, in

John 13:17, he says,

Now that you know these things, God will bless you for doing them.

God blesses those who follow Jesus by picking up the towel and basin.

In this small room with his disciples, during the Passover feast just before he was to be put to death on the cross, Jesus, the great high priest redefines the sacrificial system and he washes his disciple's feet. This foot washing is an acted parable of what Jesus was about to accomplish through his death and resurrection.

He laid aside his heavenly garments to pick up the towel and basin, just as he lay aside his garments to carry the cross. He stooped down low to pick each of his disciple's feet in his

hand, just as he humbled himself and stooped down low and died a criminal's death on the cross.

He washed their feet just as his shed blood cleanses the sins of humanity and his resurrection invited them into a new life with him just as he calls his disciples to follow his example in the room.

So, as we ponder all that unfolded at this last supper. Will we do what he invites us to do? Will we follow his example? Will we become people of the towel and basin?

To consciously pick up these tools of the Christian trade and become apprentices of our Lord and Master, Jesus. And then, will we go out into our world with humility and service. Empowered and cleansed by his Holy Spirit, wherever and to whomever he takes us?

Amen? Amen.

Points to Ponder

The Gift 2.0 ~Jesus as High Priest

John 13:1-17

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.

1. Share some of the family traditions or routines you have around certain special meals like Thanksgiving, Christmas or Easter. How have these traditions been established in your family?
2. Have you ever had the experience of washing someone's feet? Have you ever had your feet washed by someone? Share some of the feelings and emotions that were generated in you by this task.
3. Jesus is the great High Priest. He is the mediator between God and humanity and is without sin. What does Jesus' role as High Priest mean to you?
4. What would be your reaction if Jesus came to you and wanted to wash your feet? Describe your feelings.
5. Why is it sometimes a struggle to live a life of humility and servanthood in our world today?
6. Discuss why baptism is important in the life of a follower of Jesus. Why is it significant to have the Holy Spirit purify and cleanse us each day?
7. What would it mean for you to be a person of the "towel and basin" in the context where God places you each day? Discuss some ways that you can use the "towel and basin" to serve others and be an example of Jesus to them.

Prayer and Action Item

Pray for one another out of the key points that were discussed. Pray for practical ways that you can be a person of the "towel and basin" in your context. Pray that God will reveal something new and inspiring to you about Jesus as King, Priest and Sacrifice this Easter.