

Maundy Thursday  
April 9, 2009

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Minneapolis, Minnesota

✠ Jesu juva ✠

## CHRIST THE SERVANT LORD

John 13:1-15, 34-35

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

**W**e call Christ “our Lord” and for good reason. He who is the only-begotten Son of God shares the same Divine substance and standing as the Heavenly Father. Jesus claims the title Himself when He declares several times that He is the “I AM” of the Old Testament, the Lord God of Israel. Being Lord, however, is more than a title. It is also a role. Isaiah 33 says: “the Lord is our Judge, The Lord is our Lawgiver, The Lord is our King; He will save us.” Now the first three statements concerning the Lord may not sound all that wonderful. Judges can be harsh. Lawgivers can be cruel. Kings can be despots. And we have many examples of human lords who were as such, who give lordship a bad reputation.

But proper lordship is not despotic or cruel. Proper lordship is concerned with the welfare of those under its rule and power. The old French saying *noblesse oblige* captures this somewhat. Nobility obligates. But proper lordship is more than obligation. It is duty carried forth in love and concern for others. A great ruler must love his people and give of himself for them. A great Lord serves His people.

God is no despot. And Christ’s Lordship is not tyranny. We see this in the last phrase from Isaiah “He will save us”. Indeed it is only through His saving us that we see the Lordship of Jesus fully enacted. And it is enacted by Him who is the Divine Son of God becoming a servant for us, by taking on our flesh, and then living as a servant among us. We heard this Palm Sunday concerning this: “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who... made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men.” He served God the Father by being faithful and obedient to His holy will and by faithfully speaking the word given Him. Indeed the Lord is the Lord’s servant first of all. He is called this in Isaiah where the Lord promises to send His Servant “Behold, My Servant shall deal prudently; He shall be exalted and extolled and be very high.”

But His service to God is accomplished by serving God’s people. The Servant of Isaiah 52 is a suffering Servant who is crucified. And Jesus Himself says: “the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” And this Maundy Thursday we see our Lord playing the part of the servant among His disciples. After the meal, St. John reports, “He rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself. After that,

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."

The point is not lost on Peter, who protests that Christ will never play the servant to him. But Jesus insists, telling Peter that if he does not allow Him to wash his feet, then Peter will have no part in Him. Christ came to serve and if we refuse His service we cannot benefit from His Lordship. The only way to have a part in Christ is to let Him serve you. This does not in any way lessen Christ's Lordship, but rather is that Lordship in action. Jesus catches the irony of this when He says to the disciples who were arguing about who was the greatest: "who is greater, he who sits at the table, or he who serves? Is it not he who sits at the table? Yet I am among you as the One who serves."



It is just the opposite of what most people expect in their relationship with God. People expect to have to serve God, not to be served by Him. They expect to have to do, to act, to perform, to work, but not to receive. And yet this is precisely what Jesus came down for, that we might receive of His service and be saved.

And Christ who is the ascended Lord, seated in majesty at the Father's right hand, still comes among us to serve. We find our part in Him when He washes our flesh in Holy Baptism. And if we reject this service from Him we cannot be saved: "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" is echoed in Jesus' later words to Peter: "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me." But receiving this washing, we receive the good gifts our Lord wishes to bestow. As Paul says in I Corinthians 6: "But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God."

Tonight we recall not only this service our Lord performed in washing the disciples' feet, but also the service He performed to them in the Last Supper. In this meal, as St. Paul tells us, our Lord established a new covenant with them and with His Church, a covenant that has its substance and power from Jesus' suffering and death as God's chosen Servant; a covenant in Christ's blood that bestows forgiveness, life and salvation upon all who eat and drink of it in faith. "Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me... This cup is the new covenant in My blood." And through this Sacramental meal, our Lord continues His service to those whom He has washed, who abide in Him by faith. Here He who is greatest at the table, is also the one laid out upon the table, serving us His own life-giving flesh and blood. This is why we call our worship "the Divine Service". Our Lord serves us in love that we may be receive strengthening of faith and life from His own.

Our Lord also sets this example before us, so that we may know how to live in love and service to one another. After washing the disciples feet He says: "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you." And then a little later He says to them: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." May our Lord through His loving service to us instill such love in us too; for without His love our love would quickly grow cold and fade. And this is no wish on my part, but a declaration of the reality of what happens when we commune together in unity of faith. The same service is provided by Christ to each one, that we are knit together into His one body. And being forgiven we can begin to forgive. Being loved, we are empowered to love in return. And being united with Him, we are united together as well. Thanks be to Christ, our Lord, for this lordly service. Indeed He who is judge, Lawgiver and King, serves us and saves. Amen.

✠ Soli Deo gloria ✠

