

A reflection on Palm Sunday

Have pity on me, Lord, for I am weak. Ps. 6

The BBC has produced a program very popular in the UK and now the U.S. *Call the Midwife* is based on the memoirs of a young nurse working with Anglican nuns in the early 1950's to bring decent health care to the poorest of the poor in London's East End. In one episode the midwives attempt to help an old homeless woman, covered with fleas and running sores, crazy and violent to all observers. At night, people in the street hear her mournful keening; they call it "the Workhouse Wail." In the hovel that shelters the old woman, the nurses gently loosen the boots that are stuck to her feet. With extreme tenderness, they wash her blackened feet, they apply soothing lotions, and, through their tender, welcoming care, help her to be re-born into the human race.

During the Last Supper, Jesus rose, took off his outer garments, tied a towel around his waist, poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet. As happened so many times during his ministry, he was questioned about his purpose. He told Simon Peter to stop objecting and to relax and simply accept the ritual. After Jesus was done washing all their feet, he resumed his place at the table and explained. He told them he had shown by example what he expected of them—to wash one another's feet. "If you understand this, blessed are you if you do it."

Through this ritual we see the whole mystery of caring. Every day in our health care institutions and in other places where care is given, individuals are redeemed through the loving touch of caring hands, the gentle washing of the wounds and the grime of life. The water of cleansing becomes the element of sacrament. We humble ourselves in order to do as Jesus has done. When an aged person can no longer wash herself, we do it for her, and she is worthy of our care. The youth who suffers from mental illness and has been on the street, first needs to be clean to be renewed in mind, body and

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spirit. The burn patient must endure the excruciating and healing bath so that new skin might grow.

Washing one another's feet, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked—here is the core of the sacrifice and the sacrament that Jesus modeled for all who would follow him. In the words of Richard of Chichister:

Merciful Friend, Brother, and Redeemer,
let me know you more clearly,
love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly,
day by day.
Amen.

The music, by Margaret Rizza and Kevin Duncan, is from the album "Her Music for Piano," Kevin Mayhew Publishers.

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