

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; he has anointed me, he has sent me”.

The result as we know, reading a few verses later, is that Jesus was driven out of his home town of Nazareth, and nearly hurled off a cliff, but “he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.”

Today we come together with mixed emotions, some of us perhaps glad to shake the dust off our feet as we leave our parish or chaplaincy, albeit temporarily; others reluctantly present, conscious of leaving behind fraught situations or pressing challenges, or, if it is duty alone that he brought you here, the security and delight of your home patch. I remember that as a parish priest I sometimes came on Maundy Thursday with mixed feelings, but I want to thank you for your presence. It is this service each year that now makes me as your bishop feel closest to being what God first called me to be in the ministry we share, a parish priest; and here before me are those for whom I care, I love and respect, and am proud to call fellow ministers and servants of Jesus Christ in the gospel and for the kingdom.

Those of you who feel under particular personal pressure or who are on the receiving end of harsh, or just unthinking, challenge or hostility will find solidarity today not just in being together, but in hearing again that Jesus suffered the rage of his own neighbours and was driven out. The Spirit anointed him to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom for those oppressed. If that is our gospel then we should be as fearless as him in proclaiming it in word and deed, even if we are sent packing like him.

It is unnecessary to remind you that Jesus passed through the midst of them and went on his way, on foot. But feet have been particularly prominent as we have travelled the way with Jesus this week. Monday’s Gospel recorded Mary anointing Jesus’ feet with precious perfume and drying his feet with her hair. Later we read of Judas walking out into the night, and tonight we read of Jesus bathing the feet of his disciples during the last supper.

The disciples’ feet had had a hard week. They had travelled from Galilee to Jerusalem for the great pilgrim feast, the Passover, which itself celebrates a long journey on foot from slavery in Egypt through forty years of wandering in the desert to freedom in the promised land. Now, little did they fully comprehend, they were on the brink of seeing a yet more mighty act of salvation, securing an eternal freedom.

As Jesus takes a basin and towel to wash their weary feet, as I did for the eight of you made deacon here last year, the issue was not whether the feet were hot, smelly or sweaty, whether they were embarrassingly gnarled or with varicose veins or verrucas – for most of us our feet aren’t our best bits! Rather, we notice simply that Jesus gets to his knees and serves them. As you and I wash the feet of those we serve, the smell and touch are a powerful reminder of the physicality at the heart of our faith and so of our ministry. Hands on – even on dirty feet – is the way. That was the way Jesus chose to be and to live- and the conclusion which follows for us is clear.

At the end of the Last Supper, the washed and cleaned feet are ready to walk – out of the city, across the Kidron Valley and up the hill a little on the other side to the olive grove called Gethsemane. From there Jesus' feet went on their hardest journey, back across the valley under arrest, for trial, then along the via dolorosa under the weight of the cross, until at Calvary nails were driven through his feet. Meanwhile the clean feet of the disciples ran in the opposite direction as they fled in fear. And, looking ahead, it will be as some journeyed on foot towards Emmaus that the risen Lord walking the same way is made known.

And when, in half an hour or so, we leave this cathedral, our feet will take us on the unique and costly path that God calls us along. I come to this Eucharist today to seek fresh grace to go not on my way but his, and I ask your prayers as I journey on from here in your service and in the service of the gospel. And be assured that as you disperse and return to your diverse ministries, whether your walk is joyful or costly, my love and prayers go with you.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon you. He has anointed you; he has sent you. May God bless you in this daunting but wonderful calling that we share.