

## Lent Course 2026 St Andrew's with St Mary's Stoke Newington

Lent 3 | Session 3 11/03/26

### Keeping Holy Time - Maundy Thursday

Maundy Thursday stands at the threshold of the **Triduum** the great three days of Christ's Passion, Death and Resurrection. It is a night of extraordinary tenderness and extraordinary gravity. Around a table, Jesus kneels. Bread is broken. A command is given. Then, in the darkness of a garden, he asks his friends to stay awake — and they cannot.

But why does the Church keep this night as she does?

Why do we **wash feet**?

Why do we celebrate the **Eucharist** with particular solemnity?

Why do some churches keep **vigil** before a place of reservation, while others gather around a more intimate **agape** meal?

Why **strip the altar**?

To understand our practice today, we need to listen carefully to the Church's memory.

But let's just be clear about how we understand **Triduum**. It means "three days" and begins on Maundy Thursday evening and unfolds through Good Friday and Holy Saturday, reaching its climax in the Easter Vigil. Liturgically, it is not three separate services but one great, continuous act of worship. This is why Maundy Thursday ends without a dismissal. There is no "Go in peace." The Church does not disperse; she pauses. The silence that follows, the stripping of the altar, the watch in the night all of it signals that we have entered something that is still happening. Good Friday continues the same liturgical movement; Holy Saturday deepens it; and only at the Easter proclamation is the great arc resolved. The absence of a dismissal is deliberate. We are not finished. We are inside the story.

### Egeria: A Fourth-Century Witness

In the late fourth century, a woman named Egeria travelled to Jerusalem and recorded how Holy Week was celebrated there. What she describes is not nostalgic re-enactment, but

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embodied participation. The people of Jerusalem moved physically through the places of Christ's Passion, praying where the events had taken place.

Her account of Thursday and the night that follows is preserved below in full:

"Thursday is like the other days from cock-crow till morning in the Anastasis. at nine o'clock, and at midday. But it is the custom to assemble earlier than on ordinary days in the afternoon at the Martyrium," in fact at two o'clock, since the dismissal has to take place sooner. The assembled people have the service: on that day, the Offering is made in the Martyrium, and the dismissal takes place at about four in the afternoon. Before the dismissal, the archdeacon makes this announcement: "Let us meet tonight at seven o'clock the church on the Eleona. There is a great effort ahead of us tonight!" After the dismissal at the Martyrium they go behind the Cross, where they have one hymn and a prayer; then the bishop makes the Offering there and everyone receives Communion. On this one day, the Offering is made Behind the Cross, but on no other day in the whole year. After the dismissal, they go to the Anastasis, where they have a prayer, the usual blessings of catechumens and faithful, and the dismissal.

Then everybody hurries home for a meal, so that, as soon as they have finished it, they can go to the church on Eleona which contains the cave which on this very day the Lord visited with the apostles. There they continue to sing hymns and antiphons suitable to the place and the day, with readings and prayers between, until about eleven o'clock at night. They read the passages from the Gospel about what the Lord said to his disciples when he sat in the very cave which is in the church. At about midnight, they leave and go up with hymns to the Imbomon, the place from which the Lord ascended into heaven. And there they again have readings and hymns and antiphons suitable to the day, and the prayers which the bishop says are all appropriate to the day.

### **FRIDAY**

When the cocks begin to crow, everyone leaves the Imbomon, and comes down with singing to the place where the Lord prayed, as the Gospels describe in the passage which begins, "And he was parted from them about a stone's cast, and prayed"? The bishop and all the people go into a graceful church which has been built there and have a prayer appropriate

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to the place and the day, and one suitable hymn. Then the Gospel passage is read where he said to his disciples, "Watch, lest ye enter into temptation", and, when the whole passage has been read, there is another prayer. From there all of them, including the smallest children, now go down with singing and conduct the bishop to Gethsemane. There are a great many people and they have been crowded together, tired by their vigil, and weakened by their daily fasting - and they have had a very big hill to come down - so they go very slowly on their way to Gethsemane. So that they can all see, they are provided with hundreds of church candles. When everyone arrives at Gethsemane, they have an appropriate prayer, a hymn, and then a reading from the Gospel about the Lord's arrest. By the time it has been read everyone is groaning and lamenting and weeping so loud that people even across in the city can probably hear it all.

Next they go with singing to the city, and walking they reach the gate at the time when people can first recognize each other. And from there every single one of them, old and young, rich and poor, goes on through the centre of the city to be present at the next service - for this above all others is the day when no one leaves the vigil till morning comes. Thus the bishop conducted from Gethsemane to the gate, and from there through the whole city as far as the Cross. By the time they arrive Before the Cross it is pretty well full day, and they have another Gospel reading, the whole passage about the Lord being led away to Pilate, and all the recorded words of Pilate to the Lord or to the Jews."

What emerges is striking from Egeria's account, some things that parallel what we do now in 2026 and some that don't.

There is more than one **Eucharist** on Maundy Thursday, but what we understand as Eucharist and is distinct from the Triduum is similar.

There is movement between **sacred sites**, a little like the moving from different parts of the church as we might do.

There is a **shared meal at home** before returning.

There is night-long **vigil**.

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There is exhaustion, fasting, tears.

There is no separation between worship and bodily participation.

Already in the fourth century, Maundy Thursday was a day of transition from table to garden, from thanksgiving to anguish.

### The Church's Developing Practice

Liturgical historian Paul Bradshaw helps us see how different strands gathered around this day.

In late antiquity, the afternoon Eucharist marked the end of Lent. Public penitents were reconciled through the rite of **canonical penance**, and catechumens completed their preparation for baptism. The evening Eucharist, celebrated after sundown, belonged not to Lent but to the **Triduum**. And this is something we can perhaps connect with, as this is the

By the medieval period, the Western Church had consolidated these strands into one principal evening Eucharist - the Mass of the Lord's Supper.

Certain ritual actions developed around this:

- The **Mandatum** (foot washing)
- The procession to a place of **reservation** (sometimes called a "repository")
- The stripping of the altar
- In some places, the office of **Tenebrae**, marked by extinguished candles (this is less common in the Anglican tradition as Tenebrae is often held at another point in Holy Week.

The word *Maundy* itself comes from the Latin *mandatum*, meaning "commandment," from Jesus' words: "A new commandment I give you, that you love one another."

This is not accidental. The action embodies the command.

## The Washing of Feet: More Than Symbol

The solemn washing of feet is ancient, though not originally part of the formal liturgy. It arises directly from John 13.

Ernest Graf reminds us that in the ancient Near East, foot washing was an act of hospitality. Roads were dusty; sandals minimal. To offer water for washing was basic courtesy. For a host to kneel and wash a guest's feet was extraordinary humility.

Jesus does this not at the beginning of the meal — but after supper. The timing is deliberate. It is not merely practical; it is revelatory.

The early Church saw in this act:

- A sign of purification
- A preparation for receiving the Eucharist
- A visible enactment of charity

Some theologians described it as a **sacramental** not a sacrament in itself, but a sacred action through which grace is mediated. The outward washing signifies inward cleansing.

When the Church washes feet on this night, she is not performing theatre. She is obeying a command, embodying humility, and enacting love.

## Eucharist, Watch, and Stripping of the Altar

Maundy Thursday is also the last Eucharist before the Easter Vigil. This gives the night a particular weight. After the liturgy, the consecrated elements may be carried in procession to a place of reservation. The altar is stripped. Decorations are removed. Candles extinguished.

The church becomes bare.

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This ritual stripping reflects abandonment. The table is cleared. The Bridegroom is taken away.

In some traditions, people remain in silent prayer — echoing Christ's plea in Gethsemane: "Could you not watch with me one hour?" The watch is not devotional excess. It is participation.

### Traditional Liturgy or Agape Meal?

Across Christian communities today, Maundy Thursday may look different in form.

Some churches keep:

- A solemn Eucharist
- The Mandatum – foot washing
- Procession to a place of reservation
- Stripping of the altar
- Extended vigil

Others gather around a simpler **agape** meal, a shared table fellowship that recalls the intimacy of the Upper Room, sometimes incorporating foot washing and movement toward prayerful watchfulness.

Though the outward shape differs, the theological heart is the same:

- The gift of sharing bread and wine
- The command to love
- The call to humility
- The invitation to remain

Both expressions grow from the Church's deep memory from Jerusalem in the fourth century, through medieval development, to our present practice.

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### Glossary of Terms

**Agape (meal):** A shared meal of Christian fellowship (from the Greek word for love).

Sometimes used on Maundy Thursday to echo the intimacy of Jesus' table with his disciples, often alongside prayer, scripture, and sometimes foot washing.

**Anastasis:** Literally "Resurrection" in Greek. In Egeria's account, this refers to the main church complex in Jerusalem associated with Christ's resurrection (linked with the Church of the Holy Sepulchre).

**Antiphon:** A short sung refrain, often from scripture, sung before and after a psalm or as part of a liturgy.

**Archdeacon:** A senior ordained leader with particular responsibility for oversight and organisation. In Egeria's account, the archdeacon gives practical directions to the gathered people.

**Catechumen / Catechumens:** Someone (or people) preparing for baptism through teaching and formation, especially in the early Church.

**Canonical penance:** A public, formal process of repentance and restoration used in the early Church for serious sin. Those who had undertaken it could be reconciled back into full communion, often near Easter.

**Chrism / Holy oils / Chrism Mass:** Special oils blessed by a bishop for sacramental use (e.g., baptism, confirmation, anointing). In many traditions the oils are blessed during Holy Week at a diocesan cathedral service, often called the Chrism Mass.

**Eucharist:** Holy Communion / the Lord's Supper - the Church's central act of worship in which bread and wine are consecrated and received as the Body and Blood of Christ.

**Eleona:** A church site on the Mount of Olives (Jerusalem), associated with Jesus' teaching and prayer with the disciples.

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**Imbomon:** A site on the Mount of Olives associated with the Ascension. Egeria describes the community going there during the night watch.

**Mandatum:** Latin for “commandment.” The term used for the foot washing on Maundy Thursday, linked especially to Jesus’ words: “A new commandment I give you... love one another.”

**Martyrium:** A major church building in Jerusalem associated with Christ’s Passion (near the holy sites). In Egeria’s description, it is a central place for the day’s worship.

**Maundy:** From *Mandatum* (“commandment”). Maundy Thursday is named after Jesus’ command to love, given on the night of the Last Supper.

**Offering:** In older liturgical language (as in Egeria), this refers to the Eucharistic celebration — the community’s offering of praise and thanksgiving, centred on bread and wine.

**Repository / Place of Repose:** A prepared place (often a side chapel or special altar) where the consecrated bread/wine may be reserved after the Maundy Thursday liturgy for communion on Good Friday, and for prayerful watchfulness.

**Reserved Sacrament:** The consecrated bread (and sometimes wine) kept after a Eucharist, usually for communion of the sick and, in Holy Week, for Good Friday.

**Sacramental:** A sacred action or object (not one of the seven sacraments) through which God’s grace is sought and signified - for example, blessings, holy water, or (in some traditions) foot washing as a grace-bearing sign of cleansing and love.

**Tenebrae:** A service of darkness (often based on psalms and readings), historically associated with the gradual extinguishing of candles, expressing the sorrow and mourning.

**Triduum:** Latin for “three days”: Maundy Thursday evening through Good Friday and Holy Saturday, reaching its climax at the Easter Vigil/Easter Day — one continuous arc of worship remembering Christ’s Passion and Resurrection.

**Vigil / Watch:** A period of prayerful staying-awake, especially on Maundy Thursday night, echoing Jesus’ call in Gethsemane: “Stay here and keep watch with me.”