

Royal Maundies of Queen Mary I, Queen Elizabeth I and Queen Elizabeth II

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Frank Henderson's Page on Liturgy and Medieval Women
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Introduction

This is the first of several studies of women and the liturgy of footwashing. In England this rite was known as the “maundy” from the biblical text that was often read or sung: Mandatum novem do vobis / A new commandment I give you (John 13:34).

The “royal maundy” on Holy Thursday was a particularly important form of the liturgy of footwashing. It was celebrated by sovereigns, that is by kings and by queens who were rulers (not wives of rulers). Because it was rare for women to be sovereign rulers, the royal maundies of such queens regnant are particularly noteworthy.

(Though queen consorts might also wash feet, this did not have the same status as that done by kings, and was not combined with the primary royal maundy.

We are fortunate to have eye witness descriptions of one royal maundy each of Queen Mary I and Queen Elizabeth I. I present these here and comment on them briefly from a liturgical perspective. In addition, to show how the royal maundy has evolved, I give a brief description of a royal maundy of the present sovereign, Queen Elizabeth II.

Unpublished Accounts

The sources of the eyewitness accounts under consideration here are identified below.

There are in addition, apparently, three additional descriptions of royal maundies of Queen Elizabeth I that have not yet been published. I hope that someone with access to these records will make them available. These have been identified by Helen Farquhar in her article, "Royal Charities (second series). Part IV. The Maundy Coins." in *The British Numismatic Journal* 1927-28, vol 19 (Second Series vol 9) (published 1930), pp 109-129 [here 112-113]. These are the following (quoting Dr Farquhar):

1. Less well known is the shorter note by Guzman de Silva, of the Maundy on April 19, 1565.

Spanish Calendar Eliz., vol i, p 425, under date April 26, 1565.

2. Also from itemised accounts of her Almoner in 1582, where it is expressly stated that "by Her Highnes owne handes" she gave to 48 women "fortie eight pens in memorye of Her Magesties aige." Moreover, it is said the money was given "to every pore woman in a whyte purse and to the said women in a redd purse. Twentye shillinges in liue of Her Magesties owne gowne, the purses costing the unusually large sum of 13 d a doz."

Brit Mus Harl MS No 1655. September 1581 to September 1582

3. We also find a very detailed description by an eye-witness on the 17th of April in 1595, when the office "of the Queenes Maundaye was performed" by "Dr Mathewes, Bisshop of Durham" the prelate "washing the right foot of 57 severell women" and giving to each a "redd purse and a whyt, as they say 40 d therein."

Addit MS, No 5832, f 219: Manuscripts collected by the Rev William Cole.

Maundy of Queen Mary I, 1556.

Source: Brian Robinson, *Silver Pennies and Linen Towels: The Story of The Royal Maundy*. London: SPCK, 1992, pp 29-30. All of the following is from this source. Line divisions are my own.

The following description of [Queen Mary I's] Maundy of 1556 is given in part of a letter dated 3 May 1556. It was written by Marco Antonio Faitta, the Secretary to Cardinal Reginald Pole (then the Papal legate in England and, what was to be, its last Roman Catholic Primate), to Dr Ippolite Chizzola, a Doctor of Divinity, in Venice. After writing on other matters, Faitta continues:

... and on Holy Thursday, at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, the most Serene Queen performed the ceremony of feet-washing, thus –

Her Majesty being accompanied by the right reverend Legate and by the Council, entered a large hall, at the head of which was my Lord Bishop of Ely, as Dean of the Queen's chaplains, with the choristers of her Majesty's chapel. Around this hall on either side there were seated on certain benches, with their feet on stools, many poor women in the number of forty and one, such being the number of the years of the most Serene Queen. Then one of the menials of the Court having washed the right foot of each of these poor persons, and this function being also next performed by the Under Almoner and also by the Grand Almoner, who is the Bishop of Chichester, her Majesty next commenced the ceremony in the following manner.

At the entrance of the hall there was a great number of the chief dames and noble ladies of the court, and they prepared themselves by putting on a long linen apron which reached the ground, and round their necks they placed a towel, the two ends of which remained pendant at full length on either side, each of them carrying a silver ewer, and they had flowers in their hands, the Queen also being arrayed in like manner. Her Majesty knelt down on both her knees before the first of the poor women, and taking in the left hand the woman's right foot, she washed it with her own right hand, drying it very thoroughly with the towel which hung at her neck, and having signed it with the cross she kissed the foot so fervently that it seemed as if she were embracing something very precious. She did the like by all and each of the other poor women, one by one, each of the ladies her attendants giving her in turn their basin and ewer and towel, and I vow to you that in all her movements and gestures, and by her manner, she seemed to act thus not merely out of ceremony, but from great feeling, and devotion. Amongst these demonstrations there was this one remarkable, that is, washing the feet, she went the whole length of that long hall, from one end to the other, ever on her knees.

Having finished and risen on her feet, she went back to the head of the hall and commenced giving in turn to each of the poor women a large wooden platter with enough food for four persons, filled with great pieces of salted fish, and two large loaves, and thus she went a second time distributing these alms.

She next returned a third time, to begin again, giving to each of the women a wooden bowl filled with wine, or rather, I think hippocras;

after which, for the fourth time, she returned and gave to each of those poor people a piece of cloth of royal mixture for clothing..

Then returning for the fifth time she gave to each a pair of shoes and stockings;

for the sixth time she gave to each a leathern purse, containing forty-one pennies, according to the number of her own years, and which in value may amount to rather more than half an Italian golden crown;

finally, going back for the seventh time, she distributed all the aprons and towels which had been carried by those dames and noble ladies, in number forty-one, giving each with her own hand.

Her Majesty then quitted the hall to take off the gown which she had worn, and half an hour afterwards she returned, being preceded by an attendant carrying the said gown, and thus she went twice round the hall, examining very closely all the poor women one by one, and then returning for the third time, she gave the said gown to the one who was in fact the poorest and most aged of them all; and this gown was of the finest purple cloth, lined with martens' fur, and with sleeves so long and wide that they reached the ground.

During this ceremony the choristers chaunted the miserere, with certain other psalms, reciting at each verse the words –

In diebus illis mulier quae erat in ciuitate peccatrix.

Later in the letter Faitta writes “I will not omit telling you that on Holy Thursday alms were distributed here in the Court to a great amount, to upwards of 3000 persons...”

Maundy of Queen Elizabeth I, 1572

Source: [William Lambart], “The Order of the Maundy made at Greenwich, March 19, 1572.” *Archaeologia*, vol 1, 1770, pp 7-9.

First, the hall was prepared with a long table on each side, and forms set by them; on the edges of which tables, and under those forms, were layed carpets, and cushions for her majesty to kneel, when she would wash them [*the poor*]. There was also another table laid across the upper end of the hall, somewhat above the foot pace, for the chappelan to stand at. A little beneath the midst whereof, and beneath the foot pace, a stool and cushion of estate was pitched for her majesty to kneel at during service time. [Emphasis in the original.]

This done, the holy water, basons, alms, and other things, being brought into the hall; and the chappelan and poor folks having taken their said places, the yeoman of the laundry, armed with a fair towel, and taking a silver bason filled with warm water and sweet flowers, washed their feet, all, one after another, wiped the same with his towel, and so making a cross a little above the toes kissed them.

After him within a while followed the sub-almoner, doing likewise, and after him the almoner himself also; then lastly her majesty came into the hall, and, after some singing and prayers made, and the gospel of Christ's washing his disciples feet read,

thirty nine ladies and gentlewomen, for so many were the poor folks (according to the number of the years complete of her majesty's age), addressed themselves with aprons and towels to wait upon her majesty;

and she kneeling down upon the cushions and carpets under the feet of the poor women, first washing one foot of every of them in so many several basons of warm water and sweet flowers, brought to her severally by the said ladies and gentlewomen, then wiped, crossed, and

kissed them, as the almoner and others had done before.

When her majesty had thus gone through the whole number of thirty nine, of which twenty sat on the one side of the hall, and nineteen on the other; she resorted to the first again, and gave to each one certain yards of broad-cloth to make a gown.

Thirdly, she began at the first, and gave to each of them a pair of shoes.

Fourthly, to each of them a wooden platter, wherein was half a side of salmon, as much lyng, six red herrings, and two cheat lofes of bread.

Fifthly, she began with the first again, and gave to each of them a while wooden dish with claret wine.

Sixthly, she received of each waiting lady and gentlewoman their towel and apron, and gave to each poor woman one of the same.

And after this the ladies and gentlewomen waited no longer, nor served as they had done throughout the courses before; but then the treasurer of the chamber (Mr Henneage) came to her majesty with thirty-nine small white purses, wherein were also thirty-nine pence (as they say) after the number of the years of her majestys age; and of him she received and distributed them severally;

which done she received of him so many several red leather purses, each containing twenty shillings, for the redemption of her majesty's gown, which (as men say) by ancient order she ought to give to some one of them at her pleasure; but she, to avoid the trouble of suit, which accustomedly was made for that preferment, had changed that reward into money to be equally divided amongst them all, namely twenty shillings a piece; and those she also delivered particularly to each one of the whole company;

and so taking her ease upon the cushion of state, and hearing the choir a little while, her majesty withdrew herself, and the company departed; for it was by that time the sun-setting.

Analysis

Though the bulk of these descriptions has to do with the footwashing itself, it is also possible to see something of the remainder of the liturgy.

Thus there is a presiding minister, who is clergy and not royalty. The 1556 description identifies that person as the Lord Bishop of Ely, Dean of the Queen's chaplains. The 1556 description merely mentions a chaplain, who had a place to stand at the front.

The 1556 description also tells us that the liturgy included one or more scripture readings, including John 13, "the gospel of Christ's washing his disciples' feet."

The 1572 description tells us that there were also singing and prayers; in part, at least, several psalms were sung. In addition to music at the beginning and end of the liturgy, it may be presumed that psalms were sung during the footwashing, lasting as long as necessary.

A very important and interesting point is made by the 1556 description. This is that the antiphon, “In diebus illis mulier quae erat in civitate peccatrix / In those days a woman of the city, who was a sinner,” was sung between *each* psalm verse – thus repeatedly. This text comes from Luke 7:37, a story of the woman who washed Jesus’ feet with her tears. Medieval churches generally sang a variety of antiphons while feet were being washed, some referring to Jesus washing his disciples’ feet, others referring to women washing the feet of Jesus. It is highly significant that the only such antiphon sung during this female ruler’s maundy was a “woman’s text” -- or at least this is the only one recalled and thought noteworthy by the eyewitness who wrote this account. (I have made a study of such women’s antiphons, which will be posted in due course.)

Maundy of Queen Elizabeth II, 1992

This liturgy took place on Maundy Thursday, April 16, 1992, in Chester Cathedral. I am very grateful to David Baldwin, Serjeant of the Vestry of Her Majesty’s Chapel Royal, for providing the following information.

Order of Service

Procession

Hymn: All my hope on God is founded

Scripture Verse: Jesus said: I give you a new commandment: Love one another....

Litany (Kyrie), Lord’s Prayer, Verses and Responses, Doxology

Psalm 138: I will give thanks unto thee, O Lord, with my whole heart

Verses, Responses and Collect

Verses, Responses and Collect

Brief Anthem

First Lesson: John 13:1-16

Distribution of Maundy Gifts to Recipients on the South Side of the Cathedral

(during which anthems are sung)

Second Lesson: Matthew 25:31-45

Distribution of Maundy Gifts to Recipients on the North Side of the Cathedral

(during which anthems are sung)

Verses, Responses and Collect for the Queen

Collect, followed by General Thanksgiving

Hymn: Forth in thy name, O Lord I go

Collect for the Feast of St Werburgh, patron of Chester Cathedral

The National Anthem

The Blessing Procession

Analysis

Here I comment briefly on this service in terms of (a) nonverbal elements, (b) persons with leadership roles, (c) verbal dimensions, and (d) musical dimensions.

The actual washing of feet has not been done since about 1730, and the nature of the maundy gifts given also has changed with time.

The principal nonverbal elements of this liturgy are (a) the initial and concluding processions, and (b) the distribution of the maundy gifts. The distribution is divided into two parts, one held in the south aisle, the other in the north aisle. Presumably this division was based on logistical considerations; it also allowed greater continuity in the flow of the liturgy.

The maundy gifts were of course distributed by the Queen herself; she is the chief minister of this part of the liturgy.

Other important persons were the Lord High Almoner, who spoke the initial verse that identified the nature of the service and gave its biblical justification. The Lord Bishop of Chester, the local diocesan, pronounced the blessing at the end. Other prayers were led by several canons of Chester Cathedral. The Dean of that cathedral read the first lesson while the Duke of Edinburgh read the second lesson.

The choir was composed of members of the Chapel Royal and the choir of Chester Cathedral. The maundy gifts – and indeed all the attendants assisting with their distribution – were from the Royal Almonry and Chapel Royal, the Queen’s own liturgical and eleemosynary establishments.

Central to the verbal elements of this service are two scripture readings, John 13:1-16 and Matthew 25:31-45. A number of prayers appropriate to the occasion were also used.

Music included opening and closing hymns, a psalm, and the national anthem. In addition, and following long tradition, a number of anthems were sung during the distribution of the maundy gifts; the concluding anthem was Handel’s “Zadok the Priest”, which has royal connotations.

The notes accompanying the order of service state that:

Recipients [of the maundy gifts] are now pensioners selected because of the Christian service they have rendered to the Church and the community.

The maundy gifts themselves are described as follows:

The red purse contains an allowance for clothing and provisions formerly given in kind and a payment for the redemption of the royal gown. The white purse contains in Maundy coin silver pennies, twopences, threepences and fourpences, as many pence as the Sovereign is years of age.