

HOW BEAUTIFUL THE FEET

by Dr. Maxine Hancock

I run up the central stairs of Regent College and catch my breath at an art installation I pass on my way to my second-floor office—Vancouver sculptor David Robinson's chalk-white piece: a preacher, pathetically thin and apparently naked, boxed in by a pulpit which is, as it turns out, also a cross. The piece is titled, "Speak," but I give it my own title as I pass: "So, you want to be a preacher?"

What particularly draws my eyes are the long, narrow feet dangling below the pulpit (Size 12, triple A, I think), feet that are painfully, vulnerably bare. Every vein is distinct, the feet bony and chalky. Normally, the speaker's feet would be encased in well-polished leather, and perhaps draped by swishing robes; here, they speak of mortality and fragility. I find these feet throat-catchingly beautiful. In the pathos of these bare feet, the artist insists that we remember this preacher's humanity.

As I slow my own hurried steps to regard these feet, I am aware that just across the stairway landing is a reproduction of a section of the Grünewald altarpiece, the original of which is installed in the Unterlinden Museum in Colmar, France. Painted by Maria Gabankova, the reproduction is clearly visible from where I stand in front of the Robinson sculpture. The altarpiece is famously richly coloured and distressingly realistic: again, it is the feet I focus on: the twisted, tortured feet of the crucified Christ, wide and calloused, peasant feet that have never known shoes. These feet do not dangle; instead, they are cruelly skewered by a huge spike to a crude foot-rest mounted on a cross that is bowed by its terrible burden.

The bleeding feet of Jesus force me to see Robinson's preacher's feet in a new way. The suffering preacher in his pulpit stands with the One whose story he is telling.

I realize I notice these feet, now, because I also notice my own. For years and years I scarcely thought about my feet—then they began to speak to me. The podiatrist shows me a model, explaining the source of my pain, and I gasp at the intricacy of the bone structure that has supported my comings and goings all these years. How beautiful they are, I think, those slender bones. How tragically slen-

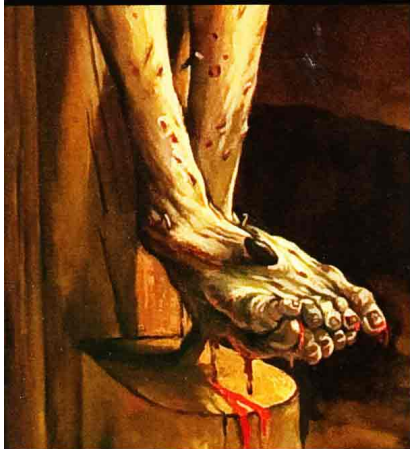
der and multi-jointed. How beautifully crafted and wonderfully made. No doubt, Jesus felt such wonder (and more, for he had created those structures in the first place) as he washed his disciples' feet that night just before that first Good Friday.

And now I am beginning to grasp something, something that slides away even as I try to articulate it: feet—Jesus' feet, Robinson's preacher's, mine; the feet of the many Regent alumni who are carrying good news as they dig gardens, raise children, make meals; as they write poems, make films, tell stories; as they preach the Word, plant churches, teach, sit in government and corporate offices—all are insistent reminders that we carry out our tasks in a vulnerable humanity shared with each other, and with him.

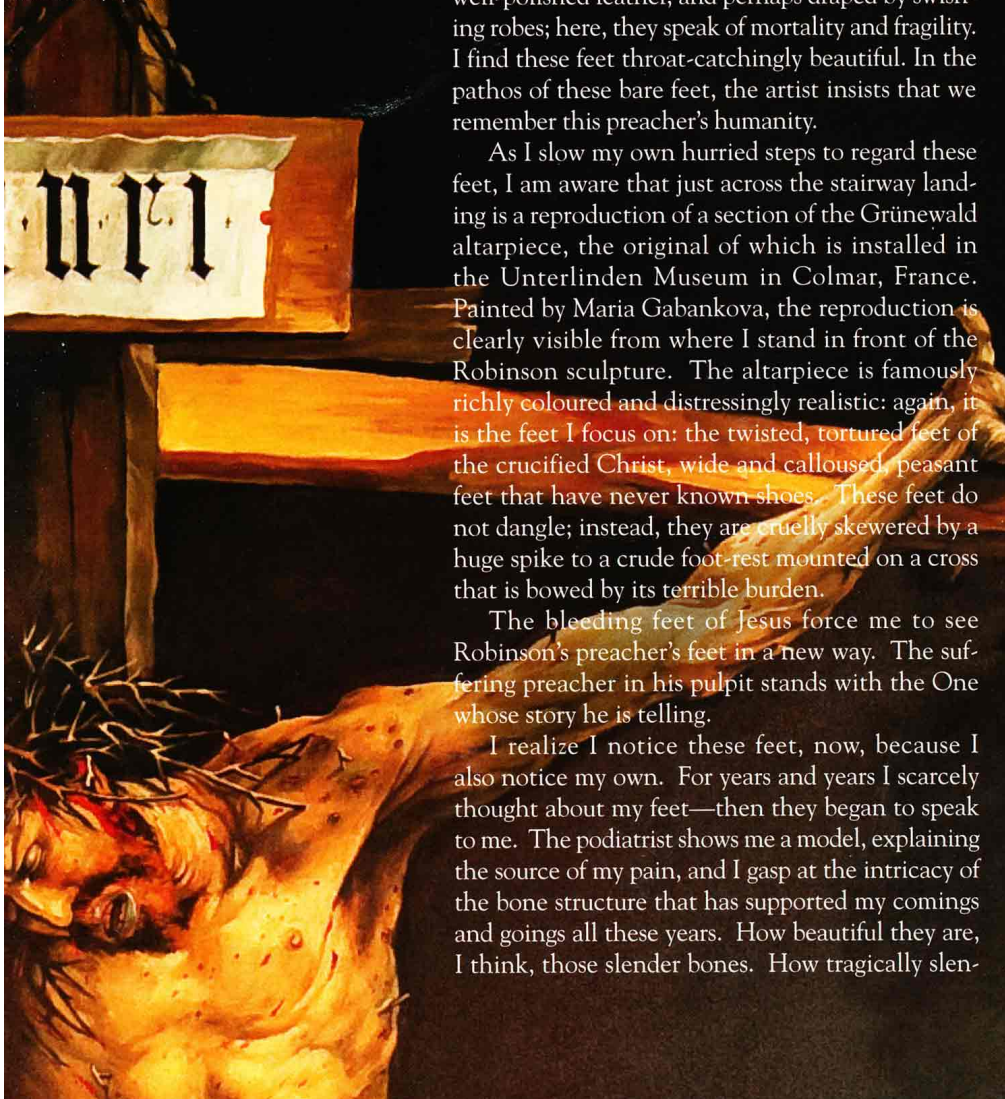
In the Incarnation, God came and walked among us, feeling the warmth of the good earth, the tiredness of a day's standing at the workbench or of walking in the thick dust of Palestinian roads. As the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews puts it: "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses..." By virtue of those feet having once been nailed to a cross, we are connected not only to earth but also to God's very self, drawn into the life and love of the Trinity. All that touches us also touches him.

So I pause at the top of the stairs at Regent and look from the cruciform preacher to the Crucified Lord and back again. "How beautiful are the feet..." I whisper, "How very beautiful the feet..." **W**

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Maria Gabankova, Copy of Grünewald's Crucifixion, detail.



David Robinson, Speak, detail