

Lent Compline Talks 2016

St Mary's Kidlington
Sunday 13th March
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The Eucharist Washing the Disciples feet in St John's Gospel

Each week we re-enact in the Eucharist elements of the last supper that are only found in the synoptic gospels, and every Maundy Thursday we re-enact Christ's washing the disciples' feet that is only found in John's gospel. Foot-washing is recorded in many records of the early church. And has continued to this day. For example, Eastern Orthodox bishops wash the feet of 12 priests. It is entirely appropriate that we do it on the Thursday because, as we saw last week, John places the last supper before the Passover.

This is the second time in the New Testament that foot-washing is mentioned – you will recall in Luke the story of Jesus being invited for a meal at the house of Simon the Pharisee and sitting down to eat “and a woman in the city who was a sinner, started to wash Jesus feet with her tears, to wipe them with her hair, and to anoint them with an unguent she had brought with her.” The Pharisee was indignant and said to all who could hear that Jesus could not be a prophet because he could not recognise what a sinner the woman was, to let her do such things. But Jesus responds that when he entered the house Simon had given him no water with which to wash his feet. Foot washing when going out to dinner is not something we are familiar with, but it had been the norm in that part of the world for centuries. There are examples stretch back to Genesis; when men visited Abraham in the heat of the day “Let a little water be fetched, and wash your feet”, again in Ch 43 when the brothers finally bring Benjamin to Joseph, their animals were fed and water provided to wash their feet.

Of course, given the dusty roads of Palestine of the time and the wearing of sandals rather than enclosing shoes, any walk would mean that the feet became very dirty. Furthermore, if you were to eat, it would not be sitting at a table with your feet tucked well out of sight, but reclining on cushions (a bit later in the passage the ‘disciple he loved’ was reclining close to Jesus) alongside a very low table, or even food laid out on a mat (definitely NOT the Leonardo painting version!) which meant that your feet would be very much in evidence, and close to other diners.

Foot washing was done in two ways: intimately, by wives for their husbands; children for their parents, and disciples for their teachers – in all these the intimacy is linked with hierarchy. Washing the feet of visitors was also the job of slaves – pure hierarchy – (and we often forget that wealthy Jews in Jesus time did own slaves) but interestingly it was the job only of gentile (but not Jewish) slaves. Thus it was a job for the lowest of the low; those inferior in every way. There is no reference to any servants or slaves being around at the last supper (which was a private meal), so that it would not have occurred to the disciples, basking in the reflected glory of the triumphant entry into Jerusalem, to wash one another's feet. So, when Jesus gets up and prepares to do just that, one can imagine the stunned silence this would have precipitated.

Now let me read the beginning of this particular part of John's gospel, because there are several elements of it that bear further thought. It occurs when Judas is still there, and starts “The devil had already put it into the mind of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. During supper, Jesus, well aware that the Father had entrusted everything to him, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, rose from table, laid aside his garments, and taking a towel, tied it around him. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel.”

Working back through that, it is Jesus who washes the disciples feet, not the acceptable other way round. But this is more than just humility or a loving act; he does so “having laid aside his outer garments” this again is a reference to a slave status – that is how slaves would be dressed to serve a meal. Others have suggested that it is an allusion to Jesus imminently laying down his life – because the same verb is used for both, and this links in with Jesus knowing that he had come from God *and was going back to God*. So Jesus washing the disciples feet suggest that this is what God himself is like – we need to be able to accept the idea that God would wash our feet of all the dirt that has accumulated over our life’s journey.

Importantly Judas is present at the foot washing, so Jesus was even prepared to wash the feet of the disciple who will betray him. So God is even prepared to cleanse us who betray him by our sins of omission and commission.

The next section of the account deals with Simon Peter’s impetuous outburst and Jesus’ responses. Peter is understandably horrified that Jesus, his hero, his master, should adopt the work of a gentile slave and wash his feet. Surely this was not fitting? So, when he realises it’s his turn and that Jesus means to wash his feet at first he poses his horror as a question “You, Lord, washing my feet?” Even after Jesus tells him that he doesn’t understand now, but will later, Peter protests “I will never let you wash my feet.” Peter doesn’t immediately get the message of humility, but shows that same pride and self-will that is part of all our natures and is at the heart of all sin.

Jesus then says to Peter “Unless I wash you, you have no part in me”. The Greek word used for “part” also means “share of inheritance” and because it was Peter’s greatest desire is to be part of Jesus’ kingdom, he responds “not just my feet but my hands and head as well” – showing both his love but also his self-centredness. He isn’t simply receiving with humility what Christ gives and it was perhaps only when he had denied his Lord three times that he realised the depths of his own self-centredness. All of us need to consider just how much we do things for our Lord and how much for ourselves.

So yet again Jesus has to correct Peter (and through Peter, the rest of the disciples including us here in Kidlington). “A person who has bathed needs no further washing; he is altogether clean”. Here Jesus was referring to the fact that religious Jews would always bathe before eating, but of course if they had to travel to eat, it would be just their feet that need washing. For us, what it means is that when we come, repentant, to Christ for the washing of our sins, we can be sure that it is permanent and complete. Jesus then adds “but not everyone of you is clean” Judas must have known what he planned to do – perhaps Jesus was giving him a last chance to change his mind?

The final part of the story of Christ washing the disciples feet again speaks directly to us. Jesus says to the disciples and to us “Do you understand what I have done? You call me Lord and rightly so. Then, if I as your Lord have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.” He doesn’t say (as for the bread and the wine) “do this *in remembrance of me*” He says ‘do AS I do’. Anyone who claims to be a disciple of Jesus must try to show the love of God that Jesus has revealed through service to one another and to others without pride or self-importance. The disciples must understand that there will inevitably be positions of leadership in Christ’s body, the church – but the basis of that leadership must be Jesus’s example of servanthood. Indeed, one could even say that, in the story of the foot-washing, we have the most profound revelation of the nature of God apart from the crucifixion itself. The community that Jesus is forming must have, as the “law of its being” humble, self-sacrificing love and service.

For us therefore, washing feet is symbolic of our role as members of the body of Christ. This is something that Jesus said over and over in his earthly ministry (Mark) “If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last of all and servant of all” and even more forcefully “he must become the *willing* slave of all”. May we all contemplate this Lent on how we can truly wash one another’s feet.

